# New Media and the Internet Meme:
# Structure, Language, Humor

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# Introduction

New communication technologies have been changing the way we have lived so far. It is changing every single aspect of our lives. This point is more than obvious. But it is not very clear to us why we are doing what we are doing. The Internet is a world in itself. The websites that exist and the websites in making have already become extraordinary repositories of knowledge. What we see on the surface is just a basic interface. To tell the truth, what lies behind is even more fascinating. The architecture of the Internet, the language employed, the interface and interactions between the screen and the real people are all singularly mind-boggling. Nevertheless, it is not my place to talk about all aspects of the Internet culture. I should not pretend to do so either. Hence, eventually, I narrowed my interest on the Internet memes. Internet memes are constantly changing pieces of media item mostly carrying humorous stuff. However, memes are not lame. Apart from being very serious in nature from time to time, even funny memes are almost always trying to articulate something. I thought it would be a good idea to read the memes from a literary perspective. With the help of social psychology, cultural studies, new media and linguistics, I set myself to the difficult task of reading memes in order to arrive at a better understanding of what they are and gain some insight into what the contemporary digital culture is all about.

It is difficult to say exactly which media items qualify as memes. For convenience, I have looked into Image Macros, the most circulated and most consumed of all types of Internet memes. There are two broad features of an Image Macro: The image template and the text. The image and the text make an intertextual nexus and a ring of laughter follows. The

questions I had in front of me was: which image templates? Why some of them are more welcoming than others? Must memes always die or can there be a classic category in the meme universe as well? If yes, then which ones make it to the memetic Hall of Fame and why?

Apart from these questions, an observation was being made by many that the memes are being preferred to simpler replies that only had words. Earlier researchers had already initiated thinking towards meme as a new language which I have tried to theorise. Memes are definitely being able to mean more than the words. The only requirement is that you will have to be 'in the know'. This is a question which has been dealt with in detail in one of the chapters. It is argued how the reason behind memes being a language is two-fold probing into the question of authority and autonomy.

Internet Memes are becoming the prime leisure of the netizens. So, dedicating a study to understand them looked relevant to me. For a while, academia was divided on the issue of 'memes'. It could not be decided whether they are worthy of scholarly attention. But as Shifman's 'Memes in Digital Culture' came out from MIT Press as part of their 'essential knowledge' series, Knoebel included a chapter on memes in New Literacies Sampler, it was becoming evident that memes are gaining traction each passing day. Now, memes are everywhere. What happened in a TV show is becoming less of a deal in speculation than how its memetic afterlife might look like. The temporal indeterminacy that the new media has afforded us is bringing in fundamental shifts in our perception of time. Questions like this has been touched sparingly because the scope of a smaller research programme has its obvious limitations.

The study has three chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to drawing the premise. The second and the third chapters deal respectively with the structure of memes and the shape of

memetic humour, the hypothesis being that the humour is always already buried in the structure of the memes.

# Understanding the Internet Meme

In the 21st century, an attempt to analyse digital content 'spreading' on a large scale on the Internet is a daunting task. The Internet never goes off, ensuring the unstoppable momentum with which humorous content populates the Internet. The Internet experiments started off in 1960s when the Federal Government of the United States funded research on the Internet. In the 1980s a basic form of Internet came into existence but it used to be the privilege of a select few. ARPANET was the name of Internet back then and it used TCP/IP protocol suite which came to be the backbone of Internet technologies.[1] ARPANET was used to share information among the military and the academics. The traffic used to be much less than today because it was used essentially to share the extremely needful material. However, after twenty years, Internet got a fresh lease of life. In 1984, Apple Macintosh was released and the number of Internet users increased overnight. In 1986, JVNCNET, NYSERNET, SURANET, SDSCNET and BARRNET got wired in one system that reached 56kbps.[2] As soon as World Wide Web wafted in, the whole scenario changed. All of a sudden, there is a possibility of building networks across the globe. The Internet does not have any boundaries. Except for stray cases like China, the entire world is smoothly connected by the Internet. Due to 'centralized control over international gateways', and various other issues like localised shutdown, surveillance, heavy penalty imposition, quelling dissidence through shutdown of social media, China has become a techno-dystopia.[3] Leaving the stray cases aside, Internet as

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[1] Kim Ann Zimmermann & Jesse Emspak. "Internet History Timeline: ARPANET to the World Wide Web." *LiveScience*. June 27, 2017. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.livescience.com/20727-internet-history.html.
[2] "Internet History 1962 to 1992." *Computer History Museum*. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.computerhistory.org/internethistory/.
[3] "Freedom on the Net 2018 Map." Map | Freedom House. February 13, 2019. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2018/map.

a new frontier of technology has affected lives. This freedom triggered a series of ripples that altered the social, cultural and political lives of people beyond recognition. New divides are being made. New security and trust issues are coming up. State regulation and monitoring is changing. Internet of Things are changing the way we used to do business and marketing. Democracy, dissent, corporate powers are forming more complicated relationships with people and society at large. Social media is giving rise to the 'Silent Majority'.[4] The Internet, virtual spaces, Social Media became part of real lives, quite unmistakably, since the turn of the century.

One of the best things about the Internet is that it is fast, multimodal and horizontal.[5] The old world hierarchies of top-down communication were long lost now. The fact that Internet is decentralised, essentially, is going to play a key role in my argument about the politics and aims of digital humour and its subversive potential. It is multi-modal, that is, it is layered, variegated and dictates and dictums do not get to filter the content. This will have its pros and cons in the wake of niche humour which would include deliberate and casual racism, sexism, incorrectness, offensive humour being the umbrella term for all that. The other important aspect of the whole practise is that anything that can be digitised can go up on the Internet and make an impact. This can be images with comic thrust, images with texts, videos of varying lengths, so on and so forth. Of all these, images with texts, namely 'Meme' is the undisputed ruler amongst the various expressions of the comic on the Internet. Internet memes are pieces of media information that changes as it travels over the Internet. Based usually on popular image templates, taken from current popular discourses, the Internet memes comments and cracks jokes on various events of public and private lives.

4 "A Brave New World: How the Internet Affects Societies." *Internet Society*. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2017/a-brave-new-world-how-the-internet-affects-societies/.
5 "CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERNET." *POTTS ON CYBERLIBEL*. Accessed May 15, 2019. http://www.cyberlibel.com/?p=1132.

**Memes and Genes**

"We need to remember Campbell's Rule when we compare memes and genes. Genes are instructions for making proteins, stored in the cells of the body and passed on in reproduction. Their competition drives the evolution of the biological world. Memes are instructions for carrying out behaviour, stored in brains (or other objects) and passed on by imitation. Their competition drives the evolution of the mind. Both genes and memes are replicators and must obey the general principles of evolutionary theory and in that sense are the same. Beyond that they may be, and indeed are, very different – they are related only by analogy."[6]

This can be a good point of starting to see the similarities and the differences between genes and memes. Blackmore, a Memetics enthusiast, supports this analogy in the sense that since genes and memes are both, on one level, basically nothing but 'replicators' we can use the meme framework to explain the cultural evolution from an evolutionary perspective. There are, however, people like Mary Midgley or Stephen jay Gould, who call memes 'mythical entities' and 'meaningless metaphor' respectively and entire trash the idea.

In 1870, Austrian sociologist Ewald Hering coined the term 'Die Mneme' from the Greek word Mneme meaning 'memory' which German biologist Richard Semon borrowed for the title of his book in 1904.[7] More than once, memes and genes set out to signify information transmission in cultural and biological fronts respectively. Researchers like Blackmore argue for a sort of meme-gene co-evolution whereas the other researchers deny the claim saying

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[6] Susan J. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.
[7] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 10.

that differences between the two are far too many and the analogy is superfluous and far-fetched.[8]

Nevertheless, memes now form a major part of our digital lives and are the driving force in the Internet. Since studies have shown time and again that humour is one of the major forces that keep the Internet together, there is no denying that internet memes have become even more important.[9] Internet memes can get serious from time to time as we will see in the course of the thesis, but essentially there carry humorous content. Besides that, memes are a starting point to see how they are embedded in the bigger social, political and economic structures. For studying 'participatory culture', which is what the Internet is made of according to many a researcher, memes are important items of analysis.[10] The systematic study of memes is called 'Memetics'. Francis Heylighen and Klaas Chielens described Memetics as "the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes."

Memetics is a very recent development and since consensus is yet to be reached with many of the claims, it has led to heated academic debates some which are pertinent to my study. To pinpoint what memes actually are two biological positions have been taken. The first position deploys the 'epidemiology model' which says that memes are like viruses. The finest and most clear analogy would be to compare the propagation of memes with sneezes. This

[88] Susan J. Blackmore et al., *The Power of Memes* (New York: Scientific American, 2000), 65-73., Susan J. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93-107.

[9] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 66-67.
[10] Michele Knobel, *A New Literacies Sampler* (New York: Lang, 2007), 199-228. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). Jean Burgess et al., *Youtube Online Video And Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 1-15.

position is contested by scholars like Henry Jenkins who claims that the recipients do not hold this absolutely powerless position of helpless passivity.[11]

The other position is to draw analogy between memes and genes. Dissecting genes to their basic components of genotype, phenotype, transcription and code, there has been an attempt to find the exact same ideas in the cultural front.[12]

The other major point of debate deals with the issue of agency. Researchers like Blackmore argue that humans are mere 'vehicle' for memes whereas Shifman claims that there is nothing inherently undermining about the role of the human in the memetic process. Instead the people enjoy a degree of autonomy. Rosario Conte's point is remarkable here when she asks to treat people not as 'vectors' in cultural transmission but as 'actors' behind the process.[13]

However, the important point to note here is that Blackmore is not distinguishing between a regular meme and an internet meme. Internet memes need a separate treatment as they are not merely norms, practices, conventions and traditions in capsules but are social and political commentaries on many different aspects of existence. Internet memes can lambast bad politics, shred oneself to tear through the self-depreciation and flash someone pale with reminders of existential depression.[14] Unlike a meme, they do not hold the great responsibility to be acted upon. Internet memes can exist just to gag.

### About Memes

'Meme' as a term came into being from Richard Dawkins' book, 'The Selfish gene'. The important concept that he essayed to convey through this coinage is that of the transfer of

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[11] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 11.
[12] Ibid., 12.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Randi Stevenson, "10 Meme Themes of 2016," *Chicagotribune.com,* June 22, 2017, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-the-best-memes-of-2016-20161128-story.html. Paul Gil, "Examples of Memes and How to Use Them," *Lifewire*, May 06, 2019, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-a-meme-2483702.

cultural ideas through small, capsulated forms. Biologically speaking, it is the genes of the parents that determine a significant part of the character of the progeny. There are two kinds of genes in human body, dominant genes and submissive genes and through an extremely difficult biological permutation and combination; the dominant genes get passed on to the body of the child. Richard Dawkins, drawing a parallel, claimed that components of culture are similar to the genes in the DNA structure and over the years, certain parts of a culture get passed on to create the next. However, needless to say, formation of a culture is an on-going process and a level of distinctness can only be found when at least some of the dominant blocks of the culture change.

**Memes vs Internet Memes**

Ordinary memes are different from Internet memes. Let's take an example from Blackmore's 'The Meme Machine'. Culturally, it has been the practise that the women have been choosy with their partners and men were not. For a man, there is very little responsibility in this regard. Fathering many sons does not give a man any bother because he just wants to pass his genes on to as many receptacles (women) as possible. However, for the woman, it is necessary to be choosy because she can only be fertile and for a couple of decades. So, she needs to invest time to decide on her mating options. From this example, it becomes clear that the differences between the memes and the internet memes are more than their similarities.

Internet memes however, are:

"…pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mind-sets, forms of behaviour, and actions of social groups. This attribute is highly compatible to the way culture is formed in the Web 2.0 era, which is marked by platforms for creating and exchanging user generated content. YouTube,

Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, and other similar applications and sites are based on propagation of content, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, of the users, by the users, and for the users. Such sites represent "express paths" for meme diffusion: content spread by individuals through their social networks can scale up to mass levels within hours."[15]

The first major point of departure is that internet memes use the new media to get transmitted from one place to another whereas the offline memes depend on the people. Secondly, Internet memes change over the course of their transmission whereas the regular memes hardly show any trace of deviation. Thirdly, as Shifman notes[16], internet memes diffuse as a packet or group of information whereas regular memes percolate as a single piece of idea. Finally, internet memes thrive on the idea of spins and minor variations. The template remaining same, each cultural, political, social, economic group take up the image and repack it with a different set of meaning based on relatability. The prime force of memetic life rests on this practice of edit and remixes.[17]

Shifman says, memes are a 'group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form or stance', created in 'awareness' with each other and circulates on the internet 'via internet users'.[i] Internet memes thrive because they can adapt into various different situations by their power of being packaged and repackaged, mixed and remixed. Internet Memetic diffusion is thus more varied and complex than regular memetic diffusion. Regular memetic diffusion concerns life whereas internet memetic diffusion concerns leisure. An image template is hijacked in multiple different ways on the internet because individual cultures,

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[15] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 18.
[16] https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-one.html
[17] Ibid., 23.

nationalities, age groups all inherit different values and wants to see them expressed in their own unique ways.[18]

## What do the Internet Memes use

Memes usually pick up an event of considerable social or political merit. Memes have many different features as well. Shifman's important work 'Memes in Digital Culture' talks about the democratic nature of the memes[19] and how memes are deemed to be anti-intellectual. Memes are democratic in nature because digital platform makes it easy to transfer and share data very rapidly. The idea of humour in the Internet is something which would be discussed in detail in later chapters. The other feature of memes that Shifman talks about is the anti-intellectual nature of most memes. It comes from the fact that most of the memes that make rounds over the Internet have as their references pop culture stuff. Sometimes it is pop culture enmeshed with contemporary events. Either way memes are essentially image macros which have some text. It is a norm not to put a lot of text in the memes because like all other practices on the Internet, memes are quick fixes and quick releases. No one has all day. They have got to scroll more stuff.

Memetics is a recent area of academic study. It does not have a lot of literature yet. One of the important books by Shifman called 'Memes in Digital Culture', while explaining the phenomenon of memes and how and why they are compatible with the contemporary digital

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[18] Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): , doi:10.1177/1470412914546577.

[19] Carolpowell2013, "Educational Change and Censorship," *Race and Technology*, December 2, 2013, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://raceandtechnology.wordpress.com/tag/cute-cat-theory-of-digital-activism/. ; Hannah Ballantyne, "How Meme Culture Is Getting Teens into Marxism," *Vice*, April 27, 2017, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/7xz8kb/how-meme-culture-is-getting-teens-into-marxism.

culture discusses the 'hypermemetic logic' that drives it. According to Shifman, the reasons behind the compatibility are threefold.[20]

The Internet economy is attention-driven rather than content-driven in the sense that it is the attention that matters the most, or the clicks, rather than the information provided. As a consequence, spin-offs on original and famous videos are a regular affair on the internet.

The second logic is the 'social' logic of participation. Taking cue from Barry Wellman's concept of 'networked individualism', Shifman explains how in the era of the Internet any informed individual has an access to memetic participation. Photoshopping, one of the most common practices of remix on the Internet, helps the digital natives to make contents of their choice. Couched in the narrative of communal longing, this logic tells how people on the Internet create their own virtual selves, creating an online image of who they are and what they represent and in the process of it becoming part of the bigger social structures.

Finally, the third reason behind 'cultural and aesthetic' logics of participation explains how Internet is a space which is inhabited by many different people and the art of making internet memes is not restricted to YouTube or 4chan users. As a result, amateur and professional mix, top-down and bottom-up mix and we get a heady ragtag of complex and multi-faceted production of memes. In the words of Shifman, "Internet memes can be seen as sites in which historical modes of cultural production meet the new affordances of Web 2.0."[21]

**Research Questions**

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[20] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 32.
[21] Ibid., 34.

There is an emerging thought that memes can be taken to be a new language.[22][23]This is the primary focus area of my research. Can we really claim that memes is the language of the Internet, especially social media? Comparing the structure of the memes with the structure of natural language, I have shown that memes qualify as a new language as it shows structural echoes with natural languages.

As far as humour is concerned, Internet tries to come up with the most universal of images to represent its users. Cats have taken primacy so far. Lolcats, an internet meme, tops the list of memetic consumption. The reason behind this is that cats are the ultimate symbol of the silly.[24] As "Sarcasm and silliness are the two most prevalent types of humour used in Internet memes",[25] it is no wonder that on the one hand 'Demotivators' spread like wildfire and on the other hand 'lolcats' did. While talking about humour on the Internet, it is a must to talk about the local/global divide from the perspective of sharing and consumption in the sense that there is a clear line of divide although Internet is supposed to be a space with no boundaries. The six types of humour which scholars have agreed on so far are language, sex and gender, politics, ethnicity, religion and age. Among these six, language, sex and gender and age based humours are consumed by everyone across the divides whereas politics, ethnicity and religion based humour show more of a local orientation.[26] It pertains to the Internet memes only as far as they are used as themes in memetic humour but the expression is quite different. Memetic

[22] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 173-174. Patrick Davison, "The Social Media Reader : Michael Mandiberg : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming," *Internet Archive*, January 01, 1970, 120-134, accessed May 12, 2019, https://archive.org/details/TheSocialMediaReader.

[24] Jack Shepherd, "Why the Internet Loves Cats – Not Dogs," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2014, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/16/why-internet-loves-cats-not-dogs.

[25] Viriya Taecharungroj and Pitchanut Nueangjamnong, "Humour 2.0: Styles and Types of Humour and Virality of Memes on Facebook," *Journal of Creative Communications* 10, no. 3 (December 21, 2015): , doi:10.1177/0973258615614420.

[26] Limor Shifman, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 187-209, doi: 1932-8036/20070187.

expressions are absurd, 'Dadaist' and 'surreal'[27], often caring very little about logic or fidelity to reality. The realism of the memes is sometimes completely outside the domain of logic. This is the other half of focus in my research because in order to provide a complete theory of the memes, it is necessary to take into account both the form and the content of the memes. What I am showing by the end of my analysis of memetic humour is that the reasons behind meme's sense of humour being so weird are two-fold. The social reason[28] and the medial reason. The social reason is that globally the youth are now called decentralised peer-attached generation. They lack love and care in childhood and that is reflected in the meme content. But there is another aspect to it. Thanks to digital technologies, now we have an enormous repository of images that help us connect couple of totally dissociated items where the expression has been taken to its limits keeping the basic logic intact. It has only been possible because the new media allows us to do so. Doing case studies of 200 odd memes, this is the second observation that I have made and tried to justify in the course of analysis.

**Research Hypothesis**

Finally the hypothesis that I wish to draw here is that the humour of the memes stems from the structure of the memes. And the memes are structured like a language where it has constitutive syntactical components and it plays a major role in virtual communications. This

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[27] Megan Hoins and Megan Hoins, ""Neo-Dadaism": Absurdist Humor and the Millennial Generation," *Medium*, February 23, 2016, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://medium.com/@meganhoins/neo-dadaism-absurdist-humor-and-the-millennial-generation-f27a39bcf321 ; Elizabeth Bruenig, "Why Is Millennial Humor so Weird?" *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2017, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-is-millennial-humor-so-weird/2017/08/11/64af9cae-7dd5-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html ; Logan Pasqual, "Neo-dadaism: Why Absurd Memes Resonate with Millennials," *The Post*, January 30, 2018, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.thepostathens.com/article/2018/01/memes-neo-dadaism-millennial-humor.
[28] Deidre Olsen, "Why Millennials Are Making Memes about Wanting to Die," *Salon*, February 12, 2018, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2018/02/10/why-millennials-are-making-memes-about-wanting-to-die/.

further shows how in the digital space, the medial logic emerges as a determinant of the socio-cultural logic, the latter being appropriated by the former in the Internet ecology.

**Research Objective**

The objective of this research is to prepare a comprehensive and holistic theory of the memes from a sociolinguistics perspective. The interdisciplinary nature of this study has made me draw from disparate theoretical sources like structuralism, psychology, structuration, humour theories and biosemiotics.

According to Shifman, the fact that memes are hugely famous and extremely in sync with the contemporary digital culture is not a coincidence. Digital culture is conducive to the proliferation of memes. Shifman jots down three reasons primarily: the economic, the social and the cultural. In an attention driven economy like the Internet, memes can be responsible for a lot of exchange of many different kind of communication, ranging between political to contemporary funnies. In modern-day digital culture there is a 'hypermemetic logic' at work where 'almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes.' Referring to Roman Jakobson's six functions of communication,[29] Shifman suggests that memes are embedded in three structures, namely 'Participation Structures', 'Keying' and 'Communicative functions'. The six functions of communication as charted by Jakobson are referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic. Shifman says "tracing the ways in which they diffuse may prove that the ostensibly chaotic World Wide Web may in fact follow more organized cultural trajectories than meet the eye."

Taking the cue from this point, we have to put modes and methods of thinking to unpack the ways in which culture and memes are intricately related to each other. Like any other cultural

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[29] Ibid., 41.

artefact there is no way to analyse memes independent of the cultural matrix it is coming from. It is a given that the idea of an insular culture is long gone. There is no way we can go back to the 'pure' state of cultural singularity.

In order to reach a standard definition of memes, and what its functions could be, we would have to take recourse to Dawkins original thesis of the selfish gene and going further back in time, we need to undo the means and methods of survival to understand how the process of evolution works. We need to refer to Darwin and Lamarck to unravel the mysteries of evolution. Darwin said that 'all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities.' Dawkins carries on the similar vein in his book. About memes, Dawkins says that certain aspects of the culture survive as memes because they are in some ways more valuable, profit-inducing or contemporaneous. The logic is same here as that of Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall. Cultures are made up of dominant ideologies and dormant ideologies. Culture is also always in a state of flux. There is never a point to be reached and hence an endless continuum of breaking and making is underway. In such a situation, components of culture act the same as necessities or priorities of survival. The necessary strains of ideas remain and the disposable ideas are thrown out of the window, to be taken up later, when the time comes, following the logic of the continuum.[30]

**Further Breakdown of Memes: Memetics and Biology**

In her book, 'The Meme Machine', Susan Blackmore talks about a pertinent distinction between 'replicators' and 'vehicles'. Taking hint from this idea, Blackmore expounds her narrative on two separate directions, both extremely crucial to an understanding of meme and indispensable.

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[30] Susan J. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10-23.

Replication is a privilege of the humans, according to Blackmore. Only human beings are smart enough to copy mannerisms, patterns of behaviour, messages, gaits or information, virtually anything, to a stupendously perfect level of accuracy and alongside, add certain subjective flavour of one's own to that as well. Imitation is after all not as innocent as it seems to be. Citing an example of a dog, she shows that what comes naturally to human baby is something that is not even remotely familiar to a puppy. Every time someone does something to an animal, the animal has something in reply which is something which is not shown to him. Whereas the animals thrive of structures of difference, the humans choose structures of sameness as their preferred mode of reaction. And it can be seen in pre-natal stages as well implying that it has become an instinct for the human to imitate immaculately. There was a need of a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission. 'Mimeme' coming from a suitable Greek root was shortened to 'meme' so that it can sound like 'gene'.

That is how the meme comes into existence and Susan claims that any kind of imitation can be called a meme. If a story gets passed on by means of retelling, it is a meme. And to think deeply of it, almost anything that we do is done because we have been taught to do it, or someone else has done it before us and we chose to do it. There is hardly anything that is new or unique. Ideas, thoughts, practises exist separately in a sphere and some of them are being used because they are useful. To quote Susan here would be a good idea,

"'We can say that memes are 'selfish', that they 'do not care', that they 'want' to propagate themselves, and so on, when all we mean is that successful memes are the ones that get copied and spread, while unsuccessful ones do not. This is the sense in which memes 'want' to get copied, 'want' you to pass them on and 'do not care' what that means to you or your genes. This is the power behind the idea of memes. To start to think memetically we have to make a giant flip in our minds just as biologists had to do when taking on the idea of the

selfish gene. Instead of thinking of our ideas as our own creations, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans, because of our powers of imitation, have become just the physical 'hosts' needed for the memes to get around. This is how the world looks from a 'meme's eye view'."[31]

Dominant and dormant ideologies hardly have a life of their own. They are dominant and dormant because they have been made out to be. Thinking memetically, the world is not a place where beautiful ideas are contested, the real battle is between two houses of power and the one that overpowers the other gets to dictate, and rule. However, in my thesis, I will be engaging less with the questions of power and more with the problems and triumphs in the path of meme distribution and dissemination, as well as its stated goals. There is a rapid digitalisation under progress and we need to see which memes are circulated and why. Besides, I will engage philosophically whether meme is the new language of a culture which is changing itself at a breakneck speed. I would like to explore the idea of memetic bilingualism. A meme is a text that has an image macro and a text, both carrying meanings of different interest. Sometimes, one is not accessible but the other is. What are the dangers or the luxuries involved in those cases? Do half-meanings and quarter-meanings travel?

Darwin's theory can be summed up to have three essential segments: variation, selection and retention, Blackmore notes.[32] Variation means that every person is unique. Selection is arguably the most important aspect of all three. After selection we get the samples of the lot which are retained. That bit of retention comes under the third segment called retention. This fascinating process of natural progress of leaving the sodden ones behind ensures that life is self-sustainable. It is a fact that there will always be less resource and more mouths, and

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[31] Ibid., 7.
[32] Ibid., 11.

natural selection alone stands as a proof to the fact that only a portion of the whole will move on to the next level.

Do memes represent nations?[33] Is there anything inherent to the culture of a nation, the historical past that it had, and the way it is constructed? Comparing memes from India and England, this thesis will try to see postcolonial dimensions in Indian thinking, if there are any. The memes favoured internationally in the past years and the ones which have made it to the list of the bests at home feature distinct tastes in humour and sensibilities. Did Enlightenment values cross the shores and reach India? Another question that will be explored, and problematized in detail, is whether we can call memes the new language of the internet. Or is there no need to go along these theoretical frameworks because since the research is essentially based on online memes, we are talking about a transnational space, which has transcended the boundaries of race, culture, and ethnicity? What if the cultural and historical past is still getting carried on in the memes? In this context, an analysis would follow according to 'Encoding/Decoding', the Stuart Hall masterpiece that will help us dissect memetic cultural formulations and see how they are received. An important aspect of memetic communication is that it is helping spread horizontal communication. Finally, all of these diverse, open-ended and disparate elements will be looked at from the lens of technology and the new media. I am trying to show how the impact of the medium is just as important as the socio-temporal, cultural and political reality we are living in in the formulation of the memetic humour.

Technology has created a depth of time hitherto unseen in human history. Even a few decades back, life used to be bound to physical time. People had to go to work and then come back to meet their family. While travelling in the metro, no one would order grocery to be delivered in two days' time and shoot a bunch of mails to people in various positions in a

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[33] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 152.

company giving them a kick-start for the day. But after the arrival and subsequent takeover of technology, at the same time, someone can be in a real space and be on Facebook Live. Similar observations can be made in meme creation as well. Even apparently unimportant events would give rise to at least a couple of memes. As a consequence, the binaries between sacred and profane are blurring fast and extremely huge amount of meme formations are making a polyphonic space in social media. Is this meme trigger in itself memetic, and can we ever go back to a more peaceful, idyllic time when there is never a compelling push to create a meme out of an event?

Patrick Davidson writes in his essay 'The Language of Internet Memes'[34] about the generative elements existing in a meme and the ethics of attribution. Starting from Foucault's 'author function' he questions whether anonymity is the basis of a system which is unrestricted. Are memes a collective responsibility? Foucault says that the purpose of the name of the author derives from its need of classification. As Pierre Bourdieu also says in his theories of cultural production that any author comes from a distinguished and recognisable social matrix, if we are to assume now that memes are products of collective consciousness, the task here would be to check how memes, whether in its formal contents or in its conceptual delivery, subscribe to a larger narrative of an ideology or hegemony of some sort, and how it gains currency from there.

The scope and reach of digital humanities is growing by leaps and bounds. Memes have become an important political and social commentary. Using the powerful tool of humour memes take on subjects from almost all walks of life. And it is ever expanding. The Republic has the memes as its conscience. We know that ridicule can be a great leveller. Lear's fool Kent had been chastising Lear for what he was doing to Cordelia. In fact, all the fools in

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[34] Patrick Davison, "The Social Media Reader : Michael Mandiberg : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming," *Internet Archive*, January 01, 1970, , accessed May 12, 2019, https://archive.org/details/TheSocialMediaReader.

Shakespeare plays are the wisest of the whole lot. Memes create a range of possibilities of looking at a specific phenomenon, sort of a horizontal explosion of humorous content which has as its basis an image macro and some text, thus qualifying to be a body of literature. Memes are the creative output of the contemporary age. It has its pitfalls. The danger of oversimplification plagues memes. But on the other hand, the reach of memes is enviable. Conducting a research on memes will lead us to understand the phenomenon of 'memefication' (coinage mine) in a better way, and since memes are becoming a major part of our digital lives, there is all the more need to take it into the garb of academic studies. Memes have played an important part in shaping public opinion and have been enormously famous among people below 30. For the uninitiated, memes are the final commentary on a lot of situations. Given that meme-makers come from specific sections of the society, we can see memes as cultural production as well as memes as reflection of social formations.

There is an inextricable link between memes and humour. According to Freud's theory of humour as charted out in 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious',[35] there are at least two extremely important aspect of humour that tethers it to memes. First of all, humour needs a receiver. Without someone at the receiving end, there is no point in cracking a joke. The other fact is that, according to Freud, humour is basically a product of the unconscious. It is our unconscious mind that directs the 'psychical energy' necessary for the formulation of a joke. Apart from these two, Freud talks about psychical compatibility that should exist between both the parties in order for the transmission of the humour to happen. And last but not least, repetition of a joke, according to Freud, is connected to the memory, the first performance of the joke[36] which is hugely crucial in the study of digital memes because memes are part of a participatory, remix culture. Sometimes, the template remains the same

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[35] Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Vintage, 2001), 91.
[36] Ibid.

but the text is changed and vice versa. Shifman, one of the most prominent academics working in this direction says that there is great creative input even in this apparently small space of repetitive memes. Although the templates or image macros remain the same, the insertion of a text delimits the constraints.[37] Finally, as Shifman mentions in an interview how certain stereotypes are more pronounced while the jokes are being made prompts me to take up the task of looking into memes as a vehicle of a nation's cultural imagination. A nation's social, cultural, political and economic faith and position is reflected in a meme.

Following these trajectories the research is located at the intersection of traditional humanities and digital humanities and new media studies, at the crossroads of biology and culture, human agency and digital life. Memes are the new vehicle of social thought and they so far resist the classification of any kind of categorization. They are capsule graphic notes, humorous sketches, political pamphlet and so much more at the same time. Borrowing bits from multiple forms and strands of literature and news-formation, memes are the potential vehicles of transmission as well, taking the best from the lot and zipping it up in one file, so to speak. Are memes the new literature, and not just the new netizen language that only a few have got access to? Who would be excluded from the party? Are all the people on social media adept at understanding a meme in the wink of an eye? Will the memes dictate us to know what is it that we should know? Can there be a resistance to the onslaught of the memes or do people really lose the agency in the face of the memes as memes have got a life of their own and there is no turning of the wheels in the days to come? It is hinted in the Postmodern Condition by Lyotard that codes can go further than we can even physically imagine. Do the same hold true for memes?

**Nostalgia and the Internet**

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[37] Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): doi:10.1177/1470412914546577.

However, in the scope of the research we will have to be weary of the fact of not getting too celebratory about the Internet. In Robert McChesney's Digital Disconnect we see, especially in the chapters regarding capitalism and the Internet that there is hardly any of the revolutionary or egalitarian impulse left in the new Internet, Internet as we know it. Initially, the first farishtas of the Internet universe were exceptionally jubilant about the Internet because it did not have any connection to commerce or capital accumulation. But as Internet grew popular, corporations did not sit idle and started to annex and eventually corrupt the spirit of the space by its stated goals of profit-making. Over the years it has only gotten worse and has reached a point where Internet is explicitly being exploited to share and market profitable ideas. Internet ceases to remain a space which is free of capitalist muscle-flexing and eventually the voices of the powerless are gone once again. Following the footsteps of this phenomenon, a group of nay-speakers have researched to prove that the idea of participation on the Internet is quite a myth. Internet, especially social media, is an echo chamber sending people to delusion. In the absence of contrary opinions and comment threads of varied linguistic demographics, Internet is far from the ideal place imagined in the salad days of spurious revolutionary fervour. In the past decade Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's book on YouTube[38] has analysed and theorised on the practises of participation in YouTube. In the scope of my research, which will specifically take up the questions of participation in public discourses before and after the coming of the Internet, the nature of these talks, the content and the people involved, will be of immense importance. As Internet is the moment of Informational freedom, one of the questions I will look deeply into is whether it has brought any kind of specific changes in the nature of the discourse. Another aspect of investigation would be to see whether these different spaces of social formations undercut each other in the days of the Internet where ideally it should be easier to connect

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[38] Jean Burgess et al., *Youtube Online Video And Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 75-99.

and comment irrespective of your social location, specifically from the point of view of what kind of humour they are generating.

**Virality and Memes**

The question of 'virality' arises ineluctably in our discourse because the Internet functions on an attention-driven economy which renders it necessary to learn about life and death and shot to fame of media items. There are significant differences between 'virals' and 'memes'. All memes do not go viral. In fact, most of the memes in 4chan and Reddit recede into oblivion after making a couple of rounds on the said platforms. However, in more mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the situation is slightly different. Similarly, all 'virals' are not memes. Although there is still no absolute consensus regarding what qualifies as an internet meme, it is universally accepted that a meme is essentially a media item which changes part of itself as it travels along. This is the main point of difference between a meme and a viral. A viral does not change. It resists any kind of hijacking or manipulation whereas the meme thrives exactly on that. The life force of a meme depends upon (limiting our domain to Image Macros) it being manipulated by a host of cultures and subcultures and even smaller groups like fanbases.

Interestingly though, the viral and the meme do share some common features regarding virtual transmission. First of all, we would look into the six factors Shifman has charted as the reasons behind the proliferation of 'virals'.

Joseph Phelps and his colleagues has shown that humour content is the lifeline of the Internet. Their analysis of email forwarding shows that 'jokes' are the largest forwards in emails.[39] Similarly, Golan and Zaidner shows that 90 percent of advertising content is humour.[40] The reasons are easy to follow. People tend to share positive stories rather than the negative ones.

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[39] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 67.
[40] Ibid., 67.

Forwarding humorous content does not only put smile on the face of the person on the receiving end, it delivers a good message about the person who is sending it as well.

After humour, according to Shifman, it is high arousal emotional content that is best cut for virality. She writes, "The "Kony 2012" phenomenon illustrates vividly the relevance of high arousal for virality. Aired in March 2012 by the Invisible Children organization, this film launched a campaign to stop Joseph Kony's reign of terror, torture, and child abduction in Uganda." She cites The Kony 2012 incident to prove her point.[41]

Simplicity is a must, according to Shifman, for a media item to reach virality. The simpler the item, the better its reach and acceptance. The study shows that people are not keen on complicated packaging. A direct and unambiguous packaging is better received.

Prestige, which is the fourth factor, means the credibility of the source in determining its propagation. The chances of a media item being a better candidate for transmission depends upon the people involved. If it is Rihanna or Brad Pitt, it is highly likely to make more rounds than others and reach an unbelievable number of viewers. In other words, 'nudge' works in the virtual world. Ethan Zukerman's coinage 'attention philanthropy' is useful here to understand the online strategy of flooding the timelines and feeds of celebrities to influence them.

Positioning is the fifth factor affecting the virality of a piece of media. Positioning is important to hit the right target. When the news reaches the audience who are the perfect consumers of such information, a ripple can be expected. This is becoming increasingly

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[41] Les Roopanarine, "Kony 2012 – the Anti-LRA Video That Went Viral | Les Roopanarine," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2012, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/dec/31/kony-2012-lra-video-viral ; Christina Cauterucci and Christina Cauterucci, "Kony 2012 Quickly Became a Punch Line. But It Taught a Generation the Value of Skepticism.," *Slate Magazine*, September 16, 2016, accessed May 12, 2019, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/09/kony-2012-quickly-became-a-punch-line-but-what-if-it-did-more-good-than-harm.html.

important because Internet is separating and aligning itself according to various factors like age, sex, gender, location, economic and political position and so on.

Last but not least, content travels the most in the Internet when the netizens get to play a role. People have access to a lot of information and they do want to take part in bigger movements which will give their lives more meaning. So, media pieces which leave room for audience/consumer participation sow a greater chance to end up as viral content. Oden and Larsson's study point in that direction as they say people enjoy involvement rather than 'pass through it'. In a quintessentially memetic fashion, it is being seen that people like it the most when they can own the content. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg call it 'personalise content sharing'.[42]

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[42] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 55-86.

# On the Structure of the Memes as a New Language

The two-fold structure of a meme is on one level same as that of a single panel in a comic book, and yet different. The panel in the comic book holds a tiny bit of the narrative. The template of a meme also holds a tiny part of the narrative. But the narrative in the case of a meme is that of culture. Culture is ongoing, ever-changing unlike that of the story of the comic book which is contained in itself. The point of bringing the comic book analogy to initiate an analysis of the Image templates used in the memes is to highlight the difference between the two. The templates of the memes depend upon popular culture shows or important events for their survival. The memes that are made, consumed, altered and shared are all subsisting upon the instantly recognisable frames from popular shows or mega events, political or otherwise, for their next round of circulation.

To talk about the structure of the memes, it is a safe idea to begin at the basics. The claim that I am making in this chapter is that memes are the new language. Meme is the chosen language for the internet ecology. The task I have at hand is to see why it is so. In order to do that, I will have to go as far back as Saussure's General Linguistics, a book which will have the maximum theoretical bearing on my analysis of the structure of the memes. Besides trying to answer why memes are the chosen language of the net-natives, I will have to explain why it is the preferred mode of communication in the Internet ecology. Each passing day, it is becoming clearer that internet people are definitely fonder of memes and less of the so-called, ordinary language, one that employs only text. New research has shown that the computer as a system has it within itself to promote the practise of 'remix', an enormously significant term for understanding the sharing of media content in internet ecology of consume, alter, spread. However, it is problematic to call it a 'new language' as the newness here is essentially a matter of choice than skill. In order to create a meme, no one needs to be an

expert. Besides, language theories have shown that language is constantly evolving which further undermines my claim that calls it 'new language'. However, the point I am trying to make is that it is definitely new in one sense of the term. It is not even a decade since memes have become a catchphrase for the internet-users. So, temporally, it is new. The practise of this language is new, and young; almost as young as the Internet. Nevertheless, two central questions that I would concern myself with, therefore, would be, why it is that memes are so famous with net-users and what is it that goes into the making of a meme, the latter part would be discussed from a linguistic perspective using the theories of Structuration and Structuralism.

Western philosophy, from its inception, has been rife with the questions of dualities and binaries, unresolved paradoxes and rabbit holes being one of its chief characters. Interestingly enough, the meme has once again brought back to the table the question of duality albeit in a different way.

Before I begin, what actually qualifies as meme requires some mention. There is no clear-cut consensus on what can be specifically considered to be a meme but for my research I will be taking Image Macro memes only. These memes constitute the highest number among all the memes shared over the Internet. For Image Macro memes, there are image templates and texts are superimposed on top of it. The templates are taken from major popular culture events and other important events. As soon as the frame goes viral, netizens take it up and keep changing the text over and over again till the meme does not exhaust its memetic potential.

Early language theorists, for obvious reasons, were not very clear about how to broach the subject of language. In the very early days, grammar and philology were the theoretical cornerstones in the understanding of the language. But needless to say, even their

understanding of philology and grammar were also at a nascent stage. However, around 1870, Max Muller, G. Curtius and A. Schleicher made significant contribution in the field which would later come to be known as Linguistics. Max Muller wrote 'Lectures on the Science of Language', Curtius 'Principles of Greek Etymology' and Schleicher 'Concise Comparative Grammar of the Indo-Germanic Languages' and finally in 1875, we have The Life of Language written by Whitney which marks the end of the Comparativists and begins the era of Neogrammarians. In the initial days, it was thought that language is a fourth dimension. It is out there and the law of the planet does not apply to it. It is only with the Neogrammarians that we have the first baby-steps towards the theories of language as we know it. For the first time ever, a group of linguists just put 'comparative philology in the historical perspective'. There were obvious fallacies involved in their analysis. But like all other sciences, it is the mistakes that led the later generation on the right path towards a better understanding of the language.

It became clear by the time Saussure wrote the book that language is actually quite different from what it was thought to be. First of all, language has two different dimensions. It is at the same time a social phenomenon and yet there was a part in it which was strictly psychological and physiological. Unlike other institutions, language was not owned by a small group of people. Usually it is an entire community that uses one language. Besides, language is not just the speech but also the written counterpart of it has to be taken into account. What is even more problematic is that although the task of the linguist is to study the spoken language, it became nevertheless necessary to bring into the fold the written part of it. Sometimes, there are huge inconsistencies in the ways a word is spoken and a word is written. The spelling becomes unrecognisable at times. Saussure took all these small yet significant details into consideration before coming to his massively important conclusions.

Going back to the earlier point of Western philosophy being a philosophy dominated by dualities, we will have to start afresh here.[43] Once again, we will be dealing with a problem of a duality, a binary, a translation. It will be important to study how exactly the translation takes place as it would be our key to unravelling the mysteries of meme templates. Early men heard sounds. They probably knew how to use the vocal apparatus to make crude sounds. The translation here is the translation of the 'concept' to the 'sound/representation' of it. The examples that Saussure takes are those of a tree and a horse. A tree is called 'arbor' and a horse is called 'equus' in Latin. The 'concept' or the image of the tree and the words used to signify the tree are not related directly. The relation is arbitrary that basically follows a vague logic of following the sound. Whatever the sound is, the sound made by the people from a particular region or community is given an oral and later a visual representation. The letters individually taken out of the word 'tree' has no match with the letters of the word 'arbor'. Basically, the use of any language follows the logic of an arbitrary convention but that convention is not questioned because it has been there for a long time and previous generations of people have agreed to abide to it without doubting its validity or premises.

There is, however, another observation that Saussure has made which will be of utmost importance to us. Saussure makes a distinction between the individual's use of a language and the language as a system. First let us talk about a language in general and then about the individual's attempts at using it. Any language is composed of the basic norms of grammar and vocabulary. The grammar answers how to structure a sentence in a given language. For example, in English, the subject should come first and then the predicate. There will be eight parts of speech, all of them having a distinct role to play. The subject and the object are both nouns. However, the subject 'wills' the act whereas the 'object' gets to play a rather unimportant role. The object sees the act executed. The thing to be noted here is that the

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[43] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/#SH2a.

subject-verb-object pattern cannot be applied to all the languages on the planet. There are many which do not follow that structure. It can be concluded from this point that there is a nascent, implicit connection between the structuring of a language and the psychology of the people contributing to it. But it is almost an impossible task to separate the two, the thought from the language. Saussure writes in one place in General Linguistics, "In general, it is never absolutely essential to know the circumstances in which a language has developed." This may not be entirely true under different circumstances. However, it is exactly pertinent to my questions and can be dealt with later. Apart from the grammar the abundance of words in a language, the part which constitutes the vocabulary, is the other important half in any language. Words can be moulded. Words can vary depending upon context and situation. There are languages where there are a limited number of words and one word means many different things in many different situations. For example, 'shalom' the Hebrew word can mean 'hello' in one context and 'goodbye' in another. The repertoire of words, according to Saussure, is available to all the people. Everyone has access to the superset of words but each individual utterance is different from the other. This moment in structuralist thought is important for my analysis of memes. This is where I would like to introduce the structurational analysis of memes as a genre done by Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bowers.[44]

Saussurian Structuralism has, as one of its major tenets, the idea of individual speech utterance and a system of language as two components of a holistic linguistic structure. The theory of Structuration, introduced by Anthony Giddens, also has two major components as part of its system: an agent and a structure. The most striking similarity between the theories of Structuralism and Structuration is that both of them have a moment of 'irresolvability' in them. Linguistically, Saussure says that there comes a point where the external logic of a

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[44] Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (2014): , doi:10.1177/1461444814535194.

language could not be distinguished from the internal logic of the language. In a way, it is saying that you cannot have conclusive claims on a system when you yourself is part of the system. Interestingly enough, Giddens' theory reaches a same moment, however, from a sociological point of view. The individual is constantly moulding the system while being moulded by the system. The idea of an inescapable reciprocity is helpful in understanding the logic of language-formation employed in the meme universe of the Internet ecology. It is the supreme moment of undecidability, an 'aporia', a paradoxical point of no return. Following Deleuze's 'Difference and Repetition', where he says that the beginning of philosophy is a philosophical beginning[45], from this point onwards we will try to see the ways in which the agent and the structure feeds off each other and survive in the rapidly changing world of the Internet, where quick deaths are as frequent as unreal virality. As the catchphrase goes, "if you don't spread, you are dead.", we will see how in the Internet economy one meme template gets textually manipulated by millions of users hailing from million different intersecting stratum of life. An observation to make here is that the number of templates is always fewer than the number of remixes done on the template. That would be the starting point of our analysis of the structure of the memes.

**On Memetic transmission**

The most common jargon in circulation when it comes to the idea of transmission on the Internet is 'spread'. Defined with care, 'spread' as an idea covers various aspects of transmission over the Internet besides clarifying a fact that Web 2.0 is a plane and the media items 'spread' across this universe in complex ways. While talking about the designs of 'spreadability', Jenkins, Ford and Green starts off by saying how the new media environment has thrown new challenges for circulation. Primarily talking from a marketing and business

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[45] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129.

lens, their observations are nevertheless applicable to our analysis of the structure of the memes.[46]

The first means of ensuring the consumption of a certain media item is to over-produce it. There is always some uncertainty involved in the Internet ecology. Attempts are obviously made to ensure that an item reaches its target audience. Research is undertaken to absolve the crisis as much as possible. But since too many factors are involved, it cannot be predicted without a degree of uncertainty and as a result, overproduction is a key step. Amanda D. Lotz, communication studies professor at the University of Michigan, has worked extensively on this topic and she says that acknowledging that degree of uncertainty is the first step towards understanding the digital ecology.[47]

A couple of factors have been shortlisted that increase the possibility of 'spreadability'.

In the new environment the onus falls on the producer whether amateur or professional to reach the people. The old school egoism has to go and the content should reach the audience. It cannot go the other way round.

Portability is a key factor. The item should be flexible to move from one application to another or from one platform to another. If it is not editable or shareable instantly, the audience might not care for it.[48]

Content that can appeal to more than one group of audience is best suited for new media environment. If any content has the potential to reach out to surplus audience, it has an advantage in Web 2.0.

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[46] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture: With a New Afterword* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 196.

[47] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture: With a New Afterword* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 197.

[48] Ibid.

Virality is an inevitable feature in the Web 2.0. For the content to make impact, it must reach as many people as it can. As a consequence, the companies want to keep a steady stream of material. In that way, sometimes some media items end up grabbing attention in unexpected fashion.

The next point is pertinent to why I chose the Saussurian theory of language to explain the cultural phenomenon of memes,

"…success in creating material people want to spread requires some attention to the patterns and motivations of media circulation, both of which are driven by the meanings people can draw from content. After all, humans rarely engage in meaningless activities. Sometimes, it may not be readily apparent why people are doing what they are doing, but striving to understand a person's or community's motivation and interest is key for creating texts more likely to spread."[49]

The patterns are the Lang, the image templates, in the case of the memes whereas the memes themselves are the parole, or the new text manipulated by the people. After all, it is game of exchange and propagation of meanings. The meme should reflect, express the reality one lives in as closely as possible. The success, life and death of a meme depends upon its relatability.

Uncertainty is not the only defining feature for the new media environment. The shift that has taken place from 'producerly texts' to more democratic texts is creating important changes in the Web 2.0. John Fiske, communications scholar, has distinguished between these two forms of cultures. According to Fiske, the old school type 'producerly text' gave birth to 'mass culture'. However, the new practice of remix and edit where almost any individual has access to the favours of technology is creating a new culture which can be best called 'popular

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[49] Ibid., 198.

culture'. To quote from the said book, "under the producer's control, it is mass culture. Under the audience's control, it is popular culture. Grassroots circulation can thus transform a commodity into a cultural resource." Time and again we are seeing instances where people are actively taking something up, and the Internet is reviving it by giving it a fresh lease of life. This is crucial to our understanding of memes because only certain image templates, which have a wider spectrum of relatability, lives longer than the others. For example, Internet's abiding obsession for cats or the huge number of contexts to which the 'distracted boyfriend' meme can be adapted shows how certain memes are preferred to others and it is not totally random.

Lewis Hyde, drawing a distinction between 'gifts' and 'commodities', argue that gifts are obligatory but commodities are emancipatory. The thrust on commodities increased as commodities can be customised. It can be rigorously 'ordered' down to the last detail. Commodities are unique personalised expressions. The fantasy attached to commodity, according to Hyde, is different from the one attached to gifts. Gifts stand for 'reassertion' of traditional values whereas 'the fantasies of a commodity culture are those of transformation'. Shared fantasies create communities online and content is prepared that would resonate with the people of the particular communities.[50]

Humour plays an inevitable role not only in exchanging positive thoughts. Understanding the tastes and sensibilities of target audience and tailoring one's content in that direction can yield excellent results. In the same manner, a misreading can wreak havoc. Old Spice's 2010 campaign 'Smell like a Man, Man' was a breakout success. The strategy that they undertook was a simple one. Usually perfume advertisements show men who have a 'ridiculously self-assured tone' and a 'chiselled body'. In this one, they subverted these established tropes and the success was incredible. The self-parodic elements contained in the advert enabled people

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[50] Ibid., 202-203.

to 'participate' in the ongoing conversation about 'realistic men'. The bodies projected in the previous adverts were not the common body type to be found in an average man. Neither is it true that donning a perfume ensures women being attracted like moth to flame. This leads us to our next point of discussion about 'designs of spreadability': Parody.[51]

Parody is unique because it allows a person to relate to a product or media item directly on a personal level. The specific experiences people have with a product makes parody enduringly appealing. Parodying and cross-referencing make an item great conversation starter. Parody helps with social interactions because parody has as its base a 'shared history' and a run for 'nostalgia', two key elements that help parody thrive. Explaining the 2007 Toyota ad set in the virtual space of *World of Warcraft* Jenkins et al show how parody can combine disparate elements and comment on them to bring up latent issues related to personal experiences.[52]

Internet features participatory culture like no other medium. The old school read-only culture has already given way to read-comment culture. The era of producers is over. Top-down bottom-up have mixed. The lines between amateur and professional are getting thinner by the day. In other words, participatory culture has become a defining factor in the Internet space. In 2004, when Burger King launches Subservient Chicken interactive video site, interactivity upped itself by one degree. This website literally invited the audience to choose the end of the video. The member in the audience gets to write a prompt, barring anything sexual, and the video aligns itself accordingly to that.

Mysteries and hoaxes are great designs for spreadability too. There is always too much of information on the Internet and often the task of verifying the source of a material is ignored. What happens as a result is that we do not know what the original intention of a material was.

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[51] Ibid., 207.
[52] "Toyota Tacoma Enters World of Warcraft : News," *Saatchi & Saatchi*, October 12, 2007, , accessed May 12, 2019, http://saatchi.com/en-us/news/toyota_tacoma_enters_world_of_warcraft/.

But this is only part of the problem where the origin is actually difficult to locate. Sometimes, "commercially produced content which seeks to pass itself off as grassroots media, often in ways that mask the commercial and political motives of those who have produced it. In a culture which increasingly has to work through confusions about the sources and motives of digitally circulating material, there is strong incentive for bloggers and journalists to unmask the groups which are circulating "fake" or "misleading" messages online, calling them out for their deceptions." The January 2009 Heidi video incident is a prime example of the level of desperation a company (Witchery, a clothing company in this case) can show to get their name circulated.

Internet is manipulated in all possible ways by the people who use it. It is even more so in the case of commercial ventures. Timeliness and controversy are closely linked. If an incident takes place that closely resembles or falls in line with a bigger controversy that is raging, that content goes viral by the virtue of resembling. Example is given of John Tyner November 2010 incident. For a long time, the public and the media were discussing the various aspects of airport security protocols and at that very time, John Tyner's video hit the Internet. To quote, "Often, a media text spreads particularly far when it depicts a controversy a community cares about at the precise time it is looking for content which might act as its rallying cry."

This leads us to our next point which is 'rumours'. Patricia Ann Turner differentiates between temporary rumours and contemporary legends. Her study is based on American commercial ventures mostly. During the period of research it was widespread belief that Church's Chicken, Marlboro, Troop Sport are owned by Ku Klux Klan. Although the companies did not have explicitly racist policies, the rumour kept spreading around and eventually black people restrain from buying their products.

Lastly, civic media plays a big role in spreading content all across the web. Civic media includes grassroots organisations, political candidates as well as individual citizens. The focus so far has been primarily on commercial producers but in the new media environment, individuals are not falling behind in capitalising upon available Web 2.0 resources. Their strategy is simple. They compose strong messages that would appeal to the people who are either suffering from the said issue or are involved in it. We have seen the power of new media in the recent past to reach out to people irrespective of their social and geographical belonging. There is of course a danger involved concerning ethical issues but that does not deter the individuals from manipulating the materials and creating the narrative that will appeal to millions and will probably bring some political change as well. Stephen Duncombe in his book 'Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of fantasy' (2007) argues how the American Left made the mistake of adopting too rational a language in an age where remix and re-appropriation is frequently employed to hijack cultural trends to individual's benefit and ended up losing much of its vigour. This new model of activism, both 'spectacular' and 'participatory' is the contemporary digital activism.[53]

**The Theory of Structuration in Brief**

In the first chapter titled 'Elements of the Theory of Structuration' in *The Construction of society,* Giddens writes, "The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means

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[53] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture: With a New Afterword* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 221.

whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible."

Duality which has been at the forefront of our analysis throughout this chapter shows itself yet again but this time in a slightly different avatar. Here the binary is between the 'actor' and the 'society'. At the heart of the theory of Structuration, this duality is posited and it is through a rigorous analysis of this duality that the sociolinguistic theory that I propose for an understanding of the memes can be reached. I am referring to this as 'duality' over and over again because that is precisely the point that Giddens tries to make. To put it simply, the society and the individual does not exist as separate entities. Rather they are inextricably linked with each other in a perpetual continuum of change and mutuality.

Talcott Parsons, author of *The Structure of Social Action,* was one of the first academics to object to the mathematical turn in economics. The only two options left would be Marxism or Institutionalism. Parsons was well read on the previous and contemporary theories of social action and he could intuitively sense that institutionalism alone is not going to rationalise human actions. It is important to bring into the scene ethics and values. Starting off from this strongly felt point of opposition for institutionalism that does not take into account normative and ethical concerns, Parsons introduced the 'theory of action' in the place of 'rational actor model'. Theory of action was more nuanced than rational actor model. I think what he also vouched for is a better rationale for social action rather than a strictly utilitarian one. Before finally reaching his conclusion, Parsons borrowed from the likes of Durkheim, weber and Pareto. Specially of merit is Durkheim's 'Conscience Collective' following which Parsons criticised the trend in modern economics to take 'class harmony' for granted whereas the truth of the matter is that orthodox economics had 'persons' alone instead of 'class'. The other theorist who left an indelible mark on Parsons is Weber. His 'Capitalism and Protestant Ethic' where he demonstrated that the roots of capitalism is to be found in religious doctrines

impressed Parsons a great deal who already had a hunch that values and ethics need to be incorporated into the 'rational actor model' theory to make it more round and infallible.

However it is during the 1970s that Sociology underwent most of its radical paradigm shifts. In the 1970s, as Marxism got a fresh lease of life, enthusiastic thinkers all over the academia pushed Marxism to its limits and started intellectual experiments like attaching phenomenology with Marxism and clubbing Structuralism with Marxism and so on. As a result, an unexpected series of dramatic events took place. What was considered to be high and holy in Sociology till date, known as 'orthodox consensus', appeared to be weak and problematic. In its place competing theories of Phenomenology and Frankfurt School came to the forefront. Weber introduced 'verstehen' into his work. On the other hand, hermeneutics got incorporated into the lexicon of sociology which was an unprecedented event too. 'Orthodox consensus' claimed that human behaviour is the result of forces that the actors can 'neither control nor comprehend.' This received strong intellectual opposition from structuralists and post-structuralists. The time had come in Sociology to look intently into language. This was becoming apparent that language is going to be of utmost importance in the understanding of societies and cultures. One of the primary targets of Sociology became the study of language, interpretation and meaning from a sociological perspective. In order to reach a decent understanding of the theory of structuration, it is necessary to know how it is the rift between functionalism and structuralism on one hand and hermeneutics and interpretative sociology on the other that the theory of structuration finds its main thrust.

**The Connect with Structuralism**

The analogy that I will draw eventually will be between Saussurian speech/language and Giddens' actor/society. The question that bothers us here is best formulated in Marx's remark "Men let us immediately say human beings make history, but not in circumstances of their

own choosing.' This is exactly the knot that we will be trying to undo in our further analysis. Do the memes make themselves? Or is it the environment that help the memes breed so rapidly? An answer can be found in Gary Marshall's paper titled 'The Internet and Memetics'[54] which shows how the computer is a device and the Internet is space which explicitly favours instant refluxing and remixing of media items. It means that the memes carry on their shoulders the will of the computer system. It is the computer system that actually keeps the meme's production going, an answer that hurls us back to the question yet again. This will go on until we accept the fact is impossible to separate the meme from the space where it thrives. But then we are faced with a new question? Do we have no agency in authoring the memes? Is it just pure flow of randomly floating capsule media or is there a game of relative autonomy and relative freedom at play here too? By looking carefully into what goes into the making of memes, i.e., the templates and texts, and analysing them through the lens of structuration and structuralism, I will show how the actors play an active role in keeping a tab on the language of the memes and the inherent logic of human limits of cognition stops it from falling into absolute chaos. The two-fold logical structure that I am following in this analysis shows the practice of meme-making not only from a language perspective but also from a social perspective.

Saussure dissects many aspects of a language in Course in general Linguistics. One of the conclusions that he reaches is that of Lang and parole. Lang is language is general, taken in its entirety and Parole is speech, the individual speech utterance. In the case of memes, we have seen that in order for a meme to be successful the template must click rather than the text. The text varies with context. Time and place can also corrupt the text. For example, in

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[54] "The Internet and Memetics," *Internet and Memetics*, accessed May 14, 2019, http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/Conf/MemePap/Marshall.html.

the Ducreux meme[55], superimposed text is given just to fool around. It is the template that must catch on though. The acceptance of the template is important and is a must for a meme to qualify as one with potential. Once again, the judgement of the potential of a meme depends on the template. There are a limited number of templates. First it is the template that arrests the attention of the netizen. Whether or not he would be interested in reading the meme is a different matter altogether. It is a valid observation because nowadays memes are being made in local languages as well and quite often, people click on the meme first only to figure out that the language is not known that him and he would have to excuse himself from enjoying the joke intended in that meme. I got intrigued at this point. What is happening here is strikingly similar to Saussure's concept of Langue and Parole. The template is the Lang and the texts that are superimposed are instances of parole. The context of a meme varies depending upon the race, age, nationality, and ethnicity and so on. There is practically no end to this. Whenever there is a match between the text and the image, a new meme is born. The psychic act on the behalf of the meme-maker here is to connect the dots. An important question arises at this point. How do we think then? Do we think in terms of a concept, in the old formulation that Saussure gave or have we developed and have better more economical in our ways of thinking and imagining? This is a valid question because although the signified remains the same as before, the nature of the signifier changes. The signifier has a structure now. It is almost a genre even. The conventions and norms are getting set. It is not only becoming a language but also drawing a grammar of its own. What is more is that the netizen has learnt how to manipulate the signifier. It is not the same as the Chinese ideogram where you have only the image to represent what you have in your mind. In the meme, there is an image as its template and there is a small amount of pithy text that compliments, collaborates, corroborates and co-operates.

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[55] "Joseph Ducreux / Archaic Rap," *Know Your Meme*, April 27, 2019, accessed May 14, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/joseph-ducreux-archaic-rap.

Internet as a space facilitates remixing and spreading of media very quickly. As a result, thousands of memes come out every day. But only a handful of them enjoy a long span of life. The others, like everything else on the Internet, die an instant death. Meme templates follow a cultural logic. Most of the memes comes from popular culture shows. There is no dearth of entertainment these days. New movies hit the theatre; new shows hit Amazon Prime and Netflix. Consequently, memeable frames can be culled of any random show. The first few hours of a meme's life is extremely fragile. But once a meme catches the attention of millions, it stays and even enjoys a reputed afterlife. There are however places like 4chan, a carved out niche of anarchy and revolution, that does not pay any heed to virality. Similarly to language, the most famous templates get the maximum amount of attention. Meme templates like Distracted Boyfriend or Disaster Girl are insanely famous. These templates have been reused a couple of million times and yet they have not exhausted their potential. But as it is in real life languages, outside this tower of mainstream there is a wide world full of memes. Let us take a look at them. These memes, of course, get up votes. They also get shared and made into new memes but in private circles. An underground meme only appeals to its sacred coterie of sworn brothers.

The other major source of template is ministers and celebrities. Current Prime minister of India and the President of the United States are both hugely meme-genic people. From time to time they have given out fantastic template materials for memes. Apart from these obvious targets, it is the film celebs who have given out meme templates from time to time, thanks either to their bizarre sense of fashion or their supremely stupid remarks. Sometimes, however, it is just an expression caught at an awkward moment that can create meme ripples across the social media. It is therefore becoming apparent that there is an obvious constraint in the construction of memes. One cannot take up any random frame and make a meme out of it if he has any hope of making it viral. The templates are the vocabulary. The templates are

the amount of freedom one can have. The templates define the limits of this new language. One will have to think of a text that will fit the given template and not the other way round. In the case of Saussurian Langue, the total available amount of resource is the repository. Here the templates are repository. In real use of languages, we make sentences from all the words that we know. The sentence is a recombination and a reordering of the words that one already knows. Besides, if a person tries to communicate using words not easily shared by other people in the group there will be an issue. The message will not get delivered smoothly. Sometimes, it might not get transmitted at all. Similarly, in the case of meme language, one is forced to use the popular templates if the meme has to stay within the domain of continuous consumption and reproduction. The templates, therefore, are the Lang. Now the texts to be superimposed are supplied by people coming from all possible backgrounds. There is one ground of commonality though. It is only people belonging to a typical range that make the most of the memes.

Structuration theory, unlike many of the previously existing theories, draws from a multitude of sources and has a depth to it. As the theory claims that the individual actions are moulded by the social factors like the institutions and the institutions, in turn, keep transforming slightly by the deviant and non-conformist actors, we saw that the memes follow a similar logic. In the complex environment of the Internet and the Internet culture, the memes have to wait for them to trend and once they have gone you cannot reuse in million different ways to get your message across. Structuration as a theory evolved from the competing and powerful theories like functionalism/structuralism on one hand and hermeneutics/Interpretative sociology on the other. The former theories gave superiority to the 'social whole' before the individual whereas hermeneutics and interpretative sociology claimed that it is the individual subjectivity which should be given prominence above the social whole. It adds that the material world is alien to the subjectivity of the individual. From this point onwards, the

difference kept growing and structuration bridged the distance between these two mutually exclusive stances. What structuration suggests is that society and the individual form a more complex whole, and in an extremely complex fashion the social institutions themselves exert some level of force which the individual is forced to abide by.

The structure of memes will be incomplete without a brief discussion of the anti-memes. It has been established with a certain level of certainty that memes happen to inherit many aspects of the language. In particular, my disquisition has shown how the cultural logic that memes follow, especially the logic of 'virality', depends on prioritising which template to use and which ones to discard. Although the theories of structuralism and structuration can explain the linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of meme-formations, new and varied phenomena related to meme keep coming up each passing in the Internet. Even within the mainstream social interaction sites such as Facebook and Twitter can lead us to emerging trends. Anti-memes and dank memes are two such offshoots.

**Dank Memes**

'Dank' actually means good marijuana. But the original sense of the term has got partially corrupted here. Dank meme is a meme which uses appalling, garish, unnecessarily glitzy, or psychedelic templates and the text that is superimposed also primarily appeal to a special target audience. Dank memes try to use meme templates which have already lost its comic potential due to overuse. This is a comment of the nature of memes as a language. In reality, we have sometimes come across phrases which have lost their power due to too much use. Similarly, dank memes speak of that truth about a language. The crucial difference is that Internet is a space which does not take time to go 'meta' and comment on its own practises. Self-reflexivity is an ontological fact for the computer system. Jaded and trite expressions are trolled in the memetic vernacular. Internet is a ruthless place. In future, there may come a

time where there would be classic memes, meme idioms, meme phrases, meme adages, and proverbial memes and so on. Probably it is too early and too rash to make that divination. Besides, dissertation is not the right place for prophecies.

**Anti-memes**

The novelistic style of first generation of novelists was rejected by the more experimental people. For human beings as a species is curious and they always try to experiment. De-stabilising and de-limiting are also two of our favourite preoccupations. As a result, memes have their other in existence already. The language of memes is a sophisticated language. It is not the bare language that we have used so far for all these years. Earlier, language was essentially a necessity. But the language of memes is an instance of luxury, a jouissance, an excess in the already existing world of moderately advanced languages. In other words, in the olden days, the word 'tree' was invented to represent the 'tree'. The word 'tree' replaced the thing 'tree'. The rationale behind this act is clear and precise. In the case of memes, the situation is different. The meme-maker already has a high definition image template. On top it, he pastes some text. Naturally, our relationships with the language of the memes have been more objective than it has been with natural languages. Add to this, Internet's own preoccupation with restlessness, and you have a commentary on the prevalent, mainstream generic structure of the memes. Anti-memes use old memes as templates for new memes. This is complex and puzzling. Some other anti-memes deliberately use more text and fewer images just to contradict the existing structure of memes. This prevents from the norms in making to get too rigid too soon. There is already a trace of resistance. Natural languages have shown the same kind of dissatisfaction but they have taken a couple of centuries to do so. The case of the memes is different from that.

Last but not least, memes use images as templates. Culturally, since recent times, we have accepted images to be complete in themselves. But thanks to memes, culturally we have started to expect to see some text pasted on the image. Otherwise, the image feels incomplete. This may not be deliberate or even conscious but the impact would be far-reaching. Every time a meme has been made we have undervalued the image deliberately to fit some text into it so that it can precisely address the context for which it got manipulated. This kind of hijacking of image files for memetic purposes is becoming more and more prevalent. There will be a need to examine the phenomenon of memes more closely to bring to the table the full impact of these events of magnanimous cultural importance.

Structuralism explains why certain image templates are taken. But that fails to explain the entire picture. Part of what a meme is depends on the kinds of logical associations the images make with other images in a meme, or the text makes with an image in a meme. Theories of language have always said that language mould reality and reality, in turn, reshapes language too. The fact that memes have to rely for their place and propagation on factors outside of its own. The theory of structuration gives supple explanation to this. Douglas Rushkoff says, "Content is just a medium for interaction between people. The many forms of content we collect and experience online, I'd argue, are really just forms of ammunition- something to have when the conversation goes quiet at work the next day; an excuse to start a discussion with that attractive person in the next cubicle."

However, scholars have taken wide and varied approach towards analysing the Internet memes as a language. Glitch Studies, Arts Based Approach have been taken. I found this old theory of Saussure useful because memes are utterances, a kind of a performance, where the individual's enunciation matters the most rather than the paraphernalia surrounding it.

# The Shape of Humour of the Memes

Internet is a place that has incorporated the best of both worlds. Internet has verbal as well as visual humour ready at its fingertips. It depends on the user to exploit them in whichever way they like. I will be looking closely into the nature of humour vis-à-vis the presence of New Media in this part of the thesis. However, a major problem in that direction is that there is actually very little amount of literature existing specifically on the theoretical or even holistic understanding of the humour on the Internet. I would not go into details about communication morphologies. But a brief survey of the changes that took place shows us what had been the dominant instruments of mass communication of humour in the past. This is important for the analysis because in millennial humour we see a heavy reliance on the new technologies. Among the many new strategies and techniques that has afforded the millennial, 'remix' is the most important. The rampant practice of 'remix' has been facilitated by the digital technologies afforded by the Internet medium and it has never cared to pause or stop since then.

For a long time, human beings have always toyed with the idea of incongruences. To quote, "The apparent verisimilitude of the photographic image drew pranksters right from the start. Photos could be faked before the film was exposed—by arranging a tableau—and after—by cutting out one image and pasting it onto another. Folklorists have been interested in two types of hoax photographs: spirit photographs, which purport to capture ghosts and other otherworldly manifestations on film (Wojcik 1996), and tall-tale photographs, which typically show a gigantic fruit or vegetable on a farm wagon or railroad flatcar, or a chimerical beast like the jackalope— half jackrabbit and half antelope (Welsch 1974)."[56]

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[56] Trevor J. Blank, Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009), 113.

But it is only with the coming of the Internet that we have learnt to do it with ease and without any kind of hassle. We just require a couple of good Photoshop applications and a moderate level of knowledge about them and then we are ready to write a meme. Cut-paste, copy-paste, remix-spread: this has become the dominant practice for the memes to proliferate. Seeing things in unusual places has always been a chief obsession of the people but it is only after the coming of the Internet that it has become a reality. The Internet allowed the millennials to delimit themselves and lurk in corners where no one has yet explored.

There are six major trends in global humour claims Driessen. These are language, sex and gender, politics, religion, age, ethnicity. These can be further subdivided into two categories based on their local and global orientation. However there has been no strong empirical means to establish this. But humour research so far has shown that these are topics that taken up the maximum space. Apte's 'Humour and Laughter', Raskin's 'Semantic mechanisms of humour', or Oring's 'Engaging Humour', all point in that direction.[57] Staying the domain of these six types of humour themes has not stopped the netizens from bringing into the table the themes they most relate to: existential crisis, nihilism, insignificance.

Before starting an analysis of the memes, we need to take a look at the communication morphologies found on the Internet. Internet is a medium which is unique and different from the earlier popular media. The Internet can combine all four types of existing communication practices: script, sound, static images and moving images.[58] Since Internet is a medium which can combine both the visual and the textual in such an effortless fashion, there is divided opinion among the scholars as to which one of the two dominates the sphere of the Internet. D. Natharius in his 2004 article claims that the dominant mode of communication on the Internet is the visual. It started with photography in 19th century and afterwards when we had

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[57] Limor Shifman, "Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 187-209, doi: 1932-8036/20070187.
[58] Ibid.

television and video in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a distinct 'turn to the visual'. This divide between the visual/textual is important in our studies of memes. Memetic humour is extremely surreal and absurd at times. The reason behind that is that we can copy-paste any random thing now in any random place.

The Internet ecology is constantly changing and with it, the Internet vernacular. A study shows that one third of the Internet users of UK use it look for humorous content. It can be said without doubt that apart from pornography it is jokes that run the Internet. But curiously enough, digitalisation has enabled people to be more creative and as the old-school type scripted jokes are no longer appealing, Internet has suited itself to the extraordinary vernacular of memes. Memes are essentially funny, yet can be serious enough to topple governments. Memes are smart. If observational humour has to be the order of the day, memes one-upped the game by getting inventive. Memes require two basic components: an image template and a very small amount of text to be pasted on, above or below it. The Image Macro comes from any field whatsoever, quite literally. Anything relatable or viral can be used as an Image Macro as long as it serves as the storyboard to communicate the sense of the comic that will be hinted at by the punchline text. The more relatable, pithy, or apt the text is, or the inter-relation between the two is, the better the expressivity of the humour inlaid therein.

In the pre-digital world, "The story jokes are more varied. One persistent motif is the presence of three or more characters who engage in some form of one-upmanship. In a common subtype, the three characters have arrived at the pearly gates. Another story-joke type involves a magic lamp, a genie, and three wishes. A third joke type, as we have seen, is the Top Ten list. A fourth type is the parody, with a wide assortment of subtypes—parodies of Dear Abby letters, of newspaper stories and television news reports, of press releases, of

chain letters, of commercials, of movie posters, of office memoranda, of instruction manuals in general and frequently asked questions (FAQs) in particular."[59]

Image Macros are image templates with texts pasted to them. In an Image Macro, there is no space to draw an entire story of one-upping. Instead under these circumstances, a meme usually curbs down the narrative to a more minimal structure and employs an appropriate image to express the humour. It has a subtype which has the same generic set of three characters thrown into different scenarios and situations. This is a story format and is not suited for memes. The third type of joke that Frank has covered in his study is the list joke. The list joke gives out a context and what follows is a series of hilarious excuses or responses that boot that. The meme format does not allow this type of a joke either. The fourth type is parody which agrees completely to the memetic practices. So, some of the old joke formats died on the Internet not because the material ceased to be funny but because the medium and the meme structure did not allow it to.

**Objective**

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the general patterns of humour found in the memes and how they play out in the New Media environment. A new observation is made about the fact that memes have a heavy reliance on the absurd and the surreal for their humour. Since the general scheme of my thesis is to dissect the memes into its component parts and that includes analysing the content too apart from the form. The content of the memes is almost always humour. A distinction should be made here about viral content and memes. They are not the same (explained in detail in the first chapter). This had to be raised here because jokes are lifeline of the Internet and a lot of viral is humorous in nature.

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[59] Trevor J. Blank, *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009), 108.

Internet has come up with many other types of humour as well like application based interactive humour etc. But for my research, I am keeping the focus on memes alone. The claims made earlier are seen to be true after my analysis of 100 odd memes from India taken from different websites for the years 2016, 2017 and 2018.[60] The results have shown that local humour is politics, Ethnicity, sex and local issues. The global trend is however more interesting. Apart from going over the usual, the new humour shows a clear inclination towards the nonsense and the absurd. We need to investigate why. The point of this chapter is to prove that media and technology plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of humour in the contemporary culture. The medial logic is as important as the socio-political logic.

**Methodology**

This chapter is based on close reading of case studies. The samples have been drawn from three sections.

1. Some of the internationally famous memes from 2016-2018.

2. Some of the all-time favourite memes.

3. Some famous Indian memes from 2016-2018.

The sample size is close to 200.

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[60] "Best of 2017: 20 HILARIOUS Memes That Left Everyone ROFL-ing on the Internet," *The Indian Express*, January 02, 2018, accessed May 12, 2019, https://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-in-india/best-of-2017-20-hilarious-memes-that-left-everyone-rofl-ing-on-the-internet-4993192/. ; "Desi Memes 2018: From Anushka Sharma to Sacred Games All Funny Indian Memes That Went Viral | Meme News on ME.ME," *Me.me*, accessed May 12, 2019, https://me.me/news/25419. ; Sahil Rizwan and Julia Reinstein, "In Meme-orium: 35 Iconic Memes That Defined India In 2017," BuzzFeed, December 26, 2017, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilrizwan/in-meme-orium. ; "Top 20: The Most Upvoted Indian Memes," *The Next Meme*, November 04, 2014, accessed May 12, 2019, http://www.thenextmeme.com/top-20-the-most-upvoted-indian-memes/.

**Some of the international bests from 2016-2018**

**They did a surgery on a grape[61]**

They did a surgery on a grape is a meme that got viral in 2018. It is an image macro shared by the Peter Mac Cancer Centre and for some reason became Internet's mad obsession. As if the premise is not weird enough, the extent to which it has been taken to by the Internet users is stupendous. In one of the memes, where the context is that two people are out on a date and the date asks the other person "Tell me about yourself.", the person replies 'They did a surgery on a grape'. This is absurd and hilarious at the same time. Although we get the basic idea that the person is socially awkward, a major problem with the millennials, no one could have possibly expected that to be the first line.

**Moth Lamp[62]**

Internet is a weird place and no one really knows what triggers the netizens. We know that moths are hopelessly in love with lamps. Even if it kills them, a moth is never still when there is a lamp close by. One particular moth image became a favourite meme template in 2018. What the millennials made out of that is surreal, mad and absurd. Moths inside cars, moths smooching, just one image of a lamp to take a dig the strangeness of their liking and so on. All these memes are hilarious, relatable and absurd. There is a distinct shift in the patterns of jokes done in the past and the humour delivered through the memes. Nowadays, we are laughing at the distant possibility of a situation that might never really happen. The joke is on us. The old school type of joking, where one person or a norm would be lampooned is gone.

**Don't Say it[63]**

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[61] "They Did Surgery On a Grape," Know Your Meme, April 10, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/they-did-surgery-on-a-grape.
[62] "Moth Lamp," *Know Your Meme*, May 11, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/moth-lamp.

It is true that Internet is being accessed by more and more people; so far it is only the millennials, people born after 1980s, who are dominating the social media with their presence. For a meme to spread, it is social media that plays a key role. Clearly, people who make most of the memes use to talk about the problems that bother them the most. One such example in the meme universe would be the 'don't say it' meme. This one is unique because it does not employ the image macro pattern. But the intent is nevertheless hilarious. Millennials have often caught themselves in a position where they try desperately not to say something but yet end up doing so. Relatability is key to new humour and memes capitalise on that. It does not need to be funny. It does not even need to be a well-crafted joke. Self-deprecation is enough for the millennials. When a 'don't say it' meme pops up in the timeline it is more about the squeaky cringe that one feels inside at the stark relatability of the situation and less about the 'laughing out loud' of the olden times.

**Ladies Imagine[64]**

'Ladies Imagine This' was initially an innocent meme about a mom fantasising about her best possible life, one in which everything is happening exactly as she thought them out to be. But as soon as the trend caught on, people started writing their own versions of the meme following the same pattern. There were some who made it really bleak and dark, about how we are all lonely and life is meaningless. Moving on the similar lines, we had 'hurt me' meme in 2018. In this one, a sexual proposition turns itself into a bad nightmare. The bottom line remains the same in both the instances. People have started to make fun of their own anxieties and insecurities. It is becoming perfectly absurd now. People are laughing at their worst fears and turning them into memes. In a way, our only means of survival in a world that

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[63] "Don't Say It," *Know Your Meme*, February 26, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dont-say-it.

[64] "Ladies, Imagine," *Know Your Meme*, July 17, 2018, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ladies-imagine.

is rapidly losing its last shred of meaning is to turn everything into memes. This new politics of humour warmly embraces the good, the bad and ugly: all aspects of our existence. The old school style of lambasting a person, laughing at the incongruities or inconsistencies got transcended.

**The Queer case of Harambe[65]**

Internet finds humour in really weird situations. A 17 year old Gorilla Harambe, shot to safeguard the life of a kid who wandered off into the Cincinnati zoo, was made into a meme and jokes were being cracked on him.

In the olden days of the great Greeks, humouring had been looked down upon, and for good reason. In order to ridicule a person, one must at least refuse to accept the subject-as-himself. He can be seen as grotesque, mad, or plain wrong. To make fun of any of these traits, one must lend himself to his basic faculties of meanness or hoist oneself to a position of entitlement. But in the case of Harambe it is neither of them. Nor is the Freudian theory of unconscious is of much use here.

My argument is that there is an innate animalistic tendency in us that can make us laugh at the death of an animal. It comes out of the primal tension between our civil/animal selves. Civility is a performance and hence from time to time, the animal within surfaces. This falls in line with the Freudian theory of unconscious as well hinting the fact there is an amount of unresolved tension in our personal and collective unconscious-es that make us make and laugh at these jokes.

There is another theory of humour called 'Misattribution Theory of Humour' propounded by Zillmann and Bryant (1980) in an article "Misattribution Theory of Tendentious humour",

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[65] "Harambe the Gorilla," *Know Your Meme*, May 07, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/harambe-the-gorilla.

published in Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. According to this theory, in some cases, we cannot clearly explain what it is exactly that we have found funny in a situation or a context. Tendentious humour looks for a victim whereas non-tendentious humour can rely solely on wordplay.

**Most Famous Memes of all Time**

**Success Kid[66]**

In 2007, Laney Griner took a photograph of her 11-month old baby, Sammy. The extreme smug-face of the kid became a sensation from around January, 2008. Multiple versions of this meme is available on the Internet. Exploiting the extreme smug face of the kid in the image template, this meme showcases hilarious situations of one-upping.

**Pepe the Frog[67]**

Throughout 2008, Pepe the Frog hogged maximum memetic limelight with multiple memes being made on it. Pepe was thrown into million different situations. Although it started with 'feels good man' theme, it spiralled into various emotional contexts. Pepe the Frog was notably used by pop culture icons like Nicki Minaj and Katy Perry and political icons like Donald Trump. There is nothing specifically funny about the image template; however, it assumed meaning as contexts changed.[68]

**Rickrolling[69]**

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[66] "Success Kid / I Hate Sandcastles," *Know Your Meme*, March 11, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles.
[67] "Pepe the Frog," *Know Your Meme*, May 07, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog.
[68] "Pepe the Frog," *Know Your Meme*, May 07, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog.
[69] "Rickroll," *Know Your Meme*, May 09, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rickroll.

Rickrolling, one of the biggest meme hits of 2007, started out as a prank. The idea is to paste a link in an online conversation which is supposedly relevant to the topic of discussion but actually redirects one to a completely different website which has no connection whatsoever to the topic. The link redirects the persons to English musician Rick Astley's 1987 video of 'Never gonna give you up'. This is not an Image Macro but rather a major Internet phenomenon.[70]

**Scumbag Steve[71]**

Internet's one of the most hated character is Scumbag Steve. It shows the photo of a youth dressed in baggy clothes and wearing the cap sideways. Originally a photo of a young man named Blake Boston, the expression seen on the face of the guy made it extremely meme-worthy. Scumbag Steve eventually became an Image Macro about a guy who is a reckless and irresponsible freeloader who goes on making messes in various social situations. The spread of this meme started around January, 2011 and never stopped afterwards.

**Distracted Boyfriend[72]**

Antonio Guillem took a photo on 2nd November, 2015 which was about to take the Internet by storm. Known as the Distracted Boyfriend where the guy is ignoring his girlfriend and looking at another girl. The infinite memetic potential that this image template promised was taken up by the netizens without fail. Eventually it became one of the most loved internet memes of all time.[73]

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[71] "Scumbag Steve," *Know Your Meme*, May 04, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/scumbag-steve.
[72] "The Most Interesting Man in the World," *Know Your Meme*, April 30, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-most-interesting-man-in-the-world.

**All your Base are Belong to us[74]**

This popular engrish catchphrase coming from the game Zero Wing got viral around the 2000s spawning Image Macros and animations. Thrown into various funny situations like battlefield or hacked website, 'all your base are belong to us' fits right in. Guardian[75] and Wired[76] covers the transmission and rise to fame of this iconic line. However, it is an internet meme and not an image macro.

**Be Like Bill[77]**

Starting off from an unknown source, Be like Bill is an Image Macro that got into circulation around October 2015. Bill's story is that Bill finds something offensive on the Internet but prefers to move on, setting a good example for the rest. This exploitable minimal figure was then taken up by meme-writers and a huge number of memes got created and circulated.[78]

**The Most Interesting Man in the World[79]**

Swagger and confidence is good but people often start to judge when they think that someone is overdoing it and sometimes for no reason at all. The Most Interesting Man in the World template comes from the Dos Equis beer commercial which lasted from 2006-2018. This template shows a bearded good-looking man who is handsome and confident-looking. The netizens took up the image template and pasted texts to it which compliments the image.

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[74] "All Your Base Are Belong to Us," *Know Your Meme*, May 12, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/all-your-base-are-belong-to-us.
[75] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2001/feb/28/internetnews.g2

[76] https://www.wired.com/2001/02/when-gamer-humor-attacks/
[77] "Be Like Bill," *Know Your Meme*, April 10, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/be-like-bill.

[79] "The Most Interesting Man in the World," *Know Your Meme*, April 30, 2019, accessed May 12, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-most-interesting-man-in-the-world.

Sometimes, it is about self-praise, sometimes it is about one-upping. This Internet meme has never quite run entirely out of circulation.[80]

Apart from these memes, Doge, lolcat and Grumpy cat have always been there since the start of Internet. 'Advice animals' is a category in meme universe where the animals share their wisdom with the world. Some of the animal-based memes belong to that category. Cats, however, is the ubiquitous face of the Internet. Several competing theories are there as to why the cat is the undisputed favourite of the Internet. The most round explanation so far has been that cats are everything human and there is hardly viable alternative to a cat face to show the mood of individuals, or their awkwardnesses or their daily expressions.

**Indian Memes**

The six categories of humour that is listed in the opening sections of this chapter fail to capture the Indian memeing habits completely. It has been said that age, ethnicity, sex and gender, language, politics and religion has been the biggest trends in humour in general. This fails to explain why marriage is a big deal in the Indian memetic scenario. Of course, there has been the usual gag on the politicians and celebrities but a good number of jokes were hurled against the Indian society's great obsession with marriage. Apart from that, Bankura Memes should be given some attention. The dominant mode of humour in Bankura memes is the offensive. They take digs at politicians, contemporary culture, relationships and recent events, mostly via the lens of sex jokes. Sex has been their chosen favourite throughout their existence. The page got reported and they came back on popular demand. The page had been taken down twice already for showing objectionable content. But the meme-makers of Bankura memes did not relent.[81] Their logic was that most of the things that they are saying

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[81] https://www.dnaindia.com/just-before-monday/report-these-meme-pages-are-taking-regional-humour-to-new-heights-2637148

are known to the mass. It is just that they do not dare to come clean about these things for fear of moral judgment; they consume the Bankura Meme jokes without restraints at the privacy of their house. Zappavigna writes in her book, 'Tacit Knowledge and Spoken Discourse',

"Much of human experience is below-view, unattended to as we operate in the world, but integral to our performance as social creatures. We hold the experiential agility to be at once creative and efficient, to assimilate the novel and the familiar: in essence, to develop expertise. Over human history we have mythologized experts, such as the artisan, the witchdoctor and the physician by culturally locating their knowledge as hidden and unspeakable, in other words, as 'tacit'. Thus it is not surprising that the dominant contemporary research perspective on what has been termed tacit knowledge maintains that it cannot be understood in terms of how people communicate with language (Polanyi 1 969) . This book, however, seeks to demonstrate that analysing latent linguistic patterns in spoken discourse, the kinds of patterns that linguists regularly explore, reveals tacit knowledge."[82]

In a sense, Bankura Memes is talking about this kind of an implicit understanding of contemporary reality.

There is a crucial point of difference that I note between local memes and global memes. Globally the biggest worries of the millennials seem to be how to pay their educational loan or how to find the right partner. The memes go in kind of direction covering many facets of existence and not merely circling around the known places. For the most part of the Indian memes, however, it was seen to be reflective of very well-known, much talked about social problems. Most of the memes were directed at the socio-political situation, more specifically the politicians or the celebrities. As far as their private lives are concerned, the jokes make

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[82] Michele Zappavigna, *Tacit Knowledge and Spoken Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

the usual rounds around marriage, sex, relationship and office woes. There was hardly any meme that reflected on existence itself. Most of the templates were taken from popular TV shows or movies. Indian memetic scenario mostly dabs on the silly and trivial for its sustenance. In rare cases, an exception is seen. Interestingly enough, the Police departments of various states, realising the great potential of the internet memes utilised it from time to time.

**Old School Jokes**

John Warren wrote in 2005 in New York Times that joke is dead.[83] He meant it in the sense that nowadays all the humour is observational humour. The old days of coming up with a narrative with a punchline is gone and so is ethnic humour which is now a big no-no because of the new ethos of political correctness. There are four types of traditional humour according to Shifman and these are jokes with a punchline, Home Video, Commercials and Comic Lists.

**Jokes with a Punchline:** This is the oldest form of joke-telling. It is a narrative with a punchline in the end. This kind of joking requires comic timing. A lot of it depends on the person who is delivering the joke. There is a tension which would be purposely built up to be broken right the end.

**Home Video:** Home Video is an embarrassing moment of a random person caught on a camera. This works because Internet is a place where anyone can put up content and the fact that such an accident can happen to anyone certifies its popularity. This is democratic in nature.

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[83] Warren St, "Seriously, the Joke Is Dead," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2005, , accessed May 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/22/fashion/sundaystyles/seriously-the-joke-is-dead.html.

**Commercials:** Ads of different kind are good communicators of humour. Old school practitioners tapped into advertisement's infinite potential. The commercials would have a go on sex, gender, age, ethnicity, local practices and make the people laugh.

**Comic Lists:** Lists used to be made of funny things like 'twenty excuses to skip office' to gag people profusely. This is the fourth most popular type of joking that used to take place in the old days according to the study of Shifman.

**Explaining the newness**

All these memes show that millennials indulge heavily on the nonsense. It is not absurd, though. It is nonsense. We have made of a world which was stable and still. In the 19th century, practice of photography was started. That is the first time we took a real image from its context and saved it on a piece of paper. In the 21st century, when roughly two centuries have passed, the digital technologies afforded us the freedom of pasting any random thing in any random place. This increased the entropy of our grip over perception. To think about it, anything makes 'sense' because it is seen against the backdrop of a particular context. As soon as we start reducing the context, the image also starts to lose its 'meaning'. Our entire meaning making process is done against the backdrop of a template. Internet, as a medium, actually imposes this on us. The enormous power of the digital technologies pushes us to see weird items or people in unusual places. The huge potential contained in the digital technologies are being explored now. Utilising this power of this new technology, we are delimiting ourselves mentally, in the sense that we are just letting random items fall into random places without caring much about the logic behind it.

"Millennial surrealism intermixes relief with stress and levity with lunacy." Writes columnist Elizabeth Bruenig in 'Why is millennial humour so weird?'[84] in a 2017 article. For the millennials it is just a weird world. They go to college incurring heavy debt which they have to repay afterwards. While doing that they have to put off getting married, starting a family, buying a house etc, and their entire life is passed in waiting. Stuck in such a situation, the only humor that comes out is only that does not have any obligation to create any meaning. There is a structure and you are born into it. There is nothing you can do about it because you are not in a position of power.

The humor we indulge in is very much a product of the space and time that we inhabit. Apart from the fact that Internet as a space facilitates the remix culture and takes it to unprecedented levels, the times that we are living in plays a crucial role in the determination of the jokes that we will produce.

An article in the affinity magazine titled "a deeper look at millennial humor"[85] links the absurdity of the memes to the absurdity of the post-world war II because "Millennial's absurd humor is not necessarily new, though, because a movement like this has happened before. In the 1950s, the rise of Neo-dada art was taking the art scene by storm. The idea of the movement was to throw traditional ideas of art aside and accept the inherent absurdity of new pieces. Pieces from people like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were some of the most well known."… "While Neo-dadaism was big in the 1950s, the original Dada movement took place in Europe. Having been left in shambles after World War I, many artists turned to these

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[84] Elizabeth Bruenig, "Why Is Millennial Humor so Weird?" *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2017, accessed May 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-is-millennial-humor-so-weird/2017/08/11/64af9cae-7dd5-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html.
[85] Baylie Clevenger, "A Deeper Look at Millennial Humor," *Arts Culture*, January 13, 2018, accessed May 14, 2019, http://culture.affinitymagazine.us/a-deeper-look-at-millennial-humor/.

absurdist ideals. The idea was to reject the current state of culture and society. This movement was especially used in the instance of rejecting the darker times of war."[86]

An article titled 'Millennial humour is weird as hell' sums it up saying, "When the narratives they were told growing up—college matters, hard work pays off, the good guys win—turned out to be bullshit, the best way to find humor in such foundational failures was to embrace the illogical head-on. As such, an undercurrent of anxiety and resentment courses through these jokes; there's something comforting, after all, about recognizing nonsense as others strive to search for meaning. For millennials, to acknowledge nothing means anything is really the first step *toward* meaning."[87]

**Relatability**

The meme templates are not funny in themselves. They live up to their potential only when there is some text attached to it. The textual part in Image Macro memes plays a crucial role in giving the humor a direction. Relatability is of utmost importance in a meme. The templates and the texts undercut through many existing structures of society. For example, anyone who is awkward at their first date can relate to the 'they did surgery on the grapes' meme.

**Self-depreciation**

One of the most potent tools of memetic humor is its capacity for self-depreciation. Wallowing in private melancholy, laughing at misery, spiraling into their own unfathomable anxiety are some of the dark realms where millennials find a lot of humor. There is really

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Randall Colburn and Randall Colburn, "Read This: Millennial Humor Is Weird as Hell," *News*, August 23, 2017, accessed May 14, 2019, https://news.avclub.com/read-this-millennial-humor-is-weird-as-hell-1798265013.

nothing much else to do. Meanings are rapidly receding in the millennial universe and shows like Bojack Horseman and Rick and Morty are indicative of the fact.

**Decontextualisation**

Memetic humour subsists on decontextualisation. Decontextualisation takes place on at least two levels. Since the days of the jokes are over the idea is to club one observation to another to get some laughs out of it. Secondly, since the heart of the jokes lies in incongruity, putting outlandish items in weird places is sure to provoke laughter. My analysis of memetic humour supports John Warren's observation that joke is dead indeed and the spirit has not got supplanted by observational self-referentiality. With the help of one frame we ae basically taking a dig at another issue.

**Memes are 'surreal'?**

A Washington Post article[88] says that millennial humour is surreal and dark. Apart from comedies, this article talks about internet memes as well because memes are the lifeline of millennial digital life. However, this claim is problematic because surrealism came as a protest to the over-emphasis on rationality. Andre Breton in Manifestoes of Surrealism writes,

"We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating

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[88] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-is-millennial-humor-so-weird/2017/08/11/64af9cae-7dd5-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html?utm_term=.7cb2b5d247f6

directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary, escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed." [89]

Surreal art came after there was a clearly written manifesto. The philosophy was culled from the backdrop of the ongoing social practices. There was an urgent need to break the convention. It was important to show that the sleeping state is as significant as the waking state. If enough research and investigation is not done in that direction, we would never be able to understand the functioning of our brain completely. The associations that the brain makes while we are sleeping are not totally random and that gave the surrealists the first motivation towards exploring these relationships in greater detail in their works. How the brain works when someone is having a dream, what is the nature of dream-time, what is the geometry of the shapes seen in the dreams became important aspects of surreal art.

The case of the memes, then, is different. First of all, no manifesto has been written for meme-making. Internet memes came into existence very spontaneously. In the first few years of the Internet when there was no social media, jokes travelled via chain e-mails. Later, ASCI, lolcats and 'demotivators' dominated the Internet space to be followed by memes. So, there has never been any explicit philosophy that the meme-writers abide by. The essence of a meme i.e. the main thrust of comic in a meme derives either from incongruity or from sarcasm/irony. Memetic incongruity is different from general incongruities found in face-to-face jokes. Memetic incongruity exploits the visual as well as the logical. Visual incongruities are easy to comprehend as we have been seeing visual incongruities in everyday life every single day in one form or another. Visual incongruity jokes also abound and have very much been part of the mainstream culture. However, what I mean by logical incongruity

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[89] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2012), 10.

here begs an explanation. In the Internet, memes have been found which subverts or completely twists the regular logical structure and the laughter comes from there.

Hence, it cannot be conclusively said whether memes can be called surreal. Maybe on some level as they mix 'horror with humor' and such other disparate elements generously that they can be partially called 'surreal'.

**Are Memes Neo-Dada?**

Tzara writes in his 1918 manifesto on Dadaism, "Dada; know ledge of all the means rejected up until now by the shamefaced sex of comfortable compromise and good manners: Dada; abolition o/ logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada; of every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: Dada: every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archaeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future: Dada; absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity: Dada; elegant and unprejudiced leap from a harmony to the other sphere; trajectory of a word tossed like a screeching phonograph record; to respect all individuals in their folly of the moment: whether it be serious, fearful, timid, ardent, vigorous, determined, enthusiastic; to divest one's church of every useless cumbersome accessory; to spit out disagreeable or amorous ideas like a luminous waterfall, or coddle them—with the extreme satisfaction that it doesn't matter in the least—with the same intensity in the thicket of core's soul pure of insects for blood well-born, and gilded with bodies of archangels."

Time and again he mentions the 'art' in his manifesto. He says Dada means nothing. But from the tone of the text it becomes very apparent that he is channeling his rage through his

writing. There is need to break from all sort of pretty arrangement whether that is good art or not. There is a grave sense of nihilism contained in this manifesto.

The case of the Internet memes is, however, different. First of all, there has been no manifesto. The internet memes do not try to pass off as great art. In fact, it does not say anything about itself. The era of the Internet has initiated the phenomenon of the Internet memes just to have a few laughs. Later, memes became important. It got realized that a lot can be conveyed through the memes. They can even be used for marketing and commercial purposes. Basically, memes do not try to resemble art in any possible way. Secondly, memes did not emerge as a conscious reaction to something. There was nothing to react to, rather. Apart from being a serious place to have meaningful conversation, generate awareness on social and political issues, or endorse products, Internet is also a space for leisure. A lot of the memes sustain even a lifetime of a week for that reason alone. For the netizens the loss of meaning is nothing new and they are not reacting to that. Instead the fact that even that does not move them worry them. As a coping mechanism, the millennials make memes.[90] Whether it is the rules of existence, or global inequality of capital, or the religious fanaticism, there is little to be done significantly. So, the millennials make memes. Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, Priyanka Chopra or the first recorded image of Black Holes, in the already bleak universe of the memetic humor, it is just another piece of floating media which has garnered some attention only to live till the next big thing comes up.

**Further analysis**

Psychology of the meme-makers matters the most when they are making a meme. How one frames a meme depends on her ways of perceiving of the world. In an essay titled,

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[90] Deidre Olsen, "Why Millennials Are Making Memes about Wanting to Die," *Salon*, February 12, 2018, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2018/02/10/why-millennials-are-making-memes-about-wanting-to-die/.

"Psychological Factors Driving millennials", Legault gives us the reasons why the global trend of memes is so bizarre, meaningless and depressing. However, since he has talked about the global perspective, he has not really taken into account the local variations, it is nevertheless important to see how they are different. The millennials are called 'decentralised-peer-attached' (DPA) generation. Absence of reliable parenting and the rise of institutional daycares have made the millennials insecure and distrustful of everyone around them. Anxiety, insecurity, distrust have become parts of their psychological reality. Besides, being exposed to hundreds of others from a very early age and the rampant increase of social media use have made the millennials more connected to their peers than anyone else. But a study shows that even with the peers, the millennials are not comfortable to share their basic vulnerabilities. They prefer a robot to a human.

Under these circumstances, when the love and fostering of the family, a private and intimate space was totally replaced by step-families or institutional daycares, it is only likely that the memes would reflect the same kind of reality. There is no sense of stability in couple of the memes. They exist just like floating pieces of information, disconnected with the logic of reality similar to a white millennial's existence which is marked by a lack of love in the growing years.

Lastly, it is important to note that there is a clear divide between the global/local trends. The global trend shows a bleaker kind of humour whereas the local humour remained rationally tangible.

**The Medial Logic**

The New Media and technology plays a key role in shaping the humour found in the memes. Internet memes thrive on the Internet which follows the logic of the new computer technologies. Most of the literature found on the nature of memetic humour focuses on how

the lives of the millennials results in the kind of humour they produce. But that is not totally true. Internet Memes like other media items found on the Internet follows distinct a new media logic that ultimately affects the way we deal with culture as well.

Lev Manovich writes in 'The Language of New Media',

"The more likely reason why modern media has discrete levels is because it emerges during Industrial Revolution. In the nineteenth century, a new organization of production known as factory system gradually replaced artisan labour. It reached its classical form when Henry Ford installed first assembly line in his factory in 1913. The assembly line relied on two principles. The first was standardization of parts, already employed in the production of military uniforms in the nineteenth century. The second, never principle, was the separation of the production process into a set of repetitive, sequential, and simple activities that could be executed by workers who did not have to master the entire process and could be easily replaced." … "These modern media systems also followed the factory logic in that once a new "model" (a film, a photograph, an audio recording) was introduced, numerous identical media copies would be produced from this master. As I will show below, new media follows, or actually, runs ahead of a quite a different logic of post-industrial society — that of individual customization, rather that of mass standardization."[91]

'Individual customization' is the key factor in the Internet space. The next chapter of my research has a longer section dedicated to the politics of 'spreadability'. How individual customization has changed and is changing the space of Internet is dealt with in considerable detail there. The moot point is that Internet, with all its faults, can be a moderately empowering space for the downtrodden. Grassroots organizations, random individuals and amateur aspirants can all 'participate' and contribute in this new space. Add to that the fact

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[91] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 55.

that marketing and commercial ventures also need to veer towards the ongoing popular discourse and re-orient their products in a fresh manner.

Following John Fiske's point about the pluralization of meaning in the Internet space, Jenkins et al claims that the new media is a space which is characterized by 'popular culture rather than 'mass culture'. This is similar to Manovich's point about the nature of new media.

Manovich's list about the principles of New Media stresses on the aspect of 'automation' among other things. To quote,

"By the end of the twentieth century, the problem became no longer how to create a new media object such as an image; the new problem was how to find the object which already exists somewhere. That is, if you want a particular image, chances are it is already exists -- but it may be easier to create one from scratch when to find the existing one. Beginning in the nineteenth century, modern society developed technologies which automated media creation: a photo camera, a film camera, a tape recorder, a video recorder, etc. These technologies allowed us, over the course of one hundred and fifty years, to accumulate an unprecedented amount of media materials: photo archives, film libraries, audio archives…This led to the next stage in media evolution: the need for new technologies to store, organize and efficiently access these media materials."[92]

Memetic humor is weird and dark and nonsensical. Bu the factors leading up to that are as much medial as socio-cultural. Internet comes at a late stage of media hoarding. Over-abundance of material plagues us now. The media society has started to see everything as just another piece of media. There is a giant loss of meaning. Not only has the old beliefs in religion and family are crumbling, our perception of the world is concurrently changing because of the kind of media environment that we inhabit. The role of the new technologies

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[92] Ibid.

and New Media vis-à-vis the production of humor has not been stressed enough in the discussion of memetic humor, a topic which anyway requires more scholarly attention.

The new media thus curbs the freedom of humoring in two distinct ways. First of all, Image Macros, the most famous and circulated category of memes, has a specific forma and the joke must fit in to that. Secondly, the over-abundance of images in the new media environment make us see anything as just another media item. To quote Manovich, "In a post-industrial society, every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and "select" her ideology from a large (but not infinite) number of choices. Rather than pushing the same objects/information to a mass audience, marketing now tries to target each individual separately. The logic of new media technology reflects this new social logic."[93] Individuals are completely unhinged from following any dictates and they can manipulate the image whichever way she wants because of the advanced level of photoshopping that has been learnt. Seeing things in 'unusual places', and gaffing at incongruous shapes, is not only psychological or social, but also 'medial'.

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[93] Ibid., 60.

# Conclusion

Usually the ultimate goal of any language is to convey the meaning as clearly as possible. The clarity in message transmission is a result of mutual agreement between people or systems about the normative conventions that hold a language together. These governing rules and the relational mapping that stops a language from falling apart is broadly known as the grammar of that language. The governing rules are as important as the relational mapping. A sentence should not only have a structure, but the elements that make the structure should be ordered in a rigorous manner. The preposition and the conjunction should be placed in a sentence according to their functions, the roles they get to play in the sentence.

Even this is not enough. A sentence like 'blue kites stomach the horizon' does not make sense because it does not reflect any tangible reality, although it follows all the rules of English grammar perfectly and the order of the parts of speech is also correct. This leads us to the fact that a language is always being burdened with the onus of expressing clear, unambiguous thoughts that should ideally probe one towards perceivable action since the primary task of any language is to facilitate communication. It can be seen from the above example that 'structure' and 'meaning' is not essentially compatible with each other. Meaning can escape structure.

For anything to have a structure and our faculties of perception to cognise it, a physically tangible arrangement of assorted elements is necessary. A website has a structure. It has an architecture too. Layers and layers of webpages set in the right manner leads to the formation of one functional website. All the components that make up the website has a role to play. The practice of website making is an old exercise now. Naturally, the New Media has a

stupendous amount of multimedia material at its disposal. Under these circumstances, Internet memes began to emerge.

I have argued that Internet Memes can be called a new language because they can successfully communicate a wide range of emotions and sentiments. As I have shown in the case of other languages, it also has a structure. Specifically dealing with Image Macros, I have shown how they are always a combination of image and text trying to convey some feeling, thought or sentiment. Thus, Internet memes have a structure. But unlike the natural languages, the various components in the language of memes can make freer associations among themselves. An Image Macro, structurally speaking, is an image and some text. That is the only normative boundary drawn for the Internet meme. This free reign has afforded extensive liberties that actually causes much of the humour that are seen in the memes.

Showing first how the Internet memes are a new language and explaining how it has a structure like other natural or computer languages, I have argued in the course of my thesis that the humour of the memes are after all a result of its unique structure. The element of incongruity which is a most common feature of the Internet memes is part of the logic of the structure that Internet memes follow. Usually, there is a limit to the randomness of the associations that are made between the constitutive elements. When almost entirety of the meaning is emptied off, memes become absurd, absurdly funny. As long as they quote and plays on intertextuality they remain 'just' funny.

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