

Culturemes as a source of humor in memes about linguistics

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Abstract: Memes are the most typical manifestation of pop culture in the era of social media. Usually consisting of a hybrid between text and image, memes nowadays tend to drift away from the original philosophical or motivational purpose, and we find increasingly more humorous memes on social pages, to the point that the most successful memes are sometimes translated and adapted to other languages. Memes are created on a variety of topics; in our paper, we will try to analyze a series of memes about linguistics and languages, in an attempt to find the sources of humor in such memes and in the metalinguistic comments of the readers.

Keywords: *memes, social media, linguistics, clichés, humor.*

o. While articulate language is a cohesion factor that ties humanity together, individual languages constitute the factor that separates one ethno-linguistic community from another and provides it with the key to the construction of identity and individuality (Seiciuc 2009: 328). Not surprisingly, languages and linguistics have become one of the topics in online interactions in a variety of ways: pages that host resources for teachers or students who learn a foreign language, video channels explaining grammar or pronunciation, translation forums and blogs etc. The access to different languages and cultures has allowed internet users to interact with each other directly and become aware of linguistic diversity, so it is not surprising that, at some point, debates, discussions and disputes had appeared in the form of linguistic jokes, videos, GIFs and memes.

The concept of meme has evolved since it was coined, in 1976, by Richard Dawkins, who considered that memes could be “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashion, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins 2006: 192). The meaning of the word *meme* in everyday speech points to the syncretic combination of a meaningful text and a representative image. Linguistic memes on social media are usually based either on the conflict between the linguistic purists (the so-called ‘Grammar Nazis’ or ‘Grammar Police’) and the users who ignore – on purpose or not – the grammatical or spelling rules, or on the clash between two or more linguistic systems and/or the clichés regarding one language or another, and they realize these functions in playful ways. Chi Luu notices that “we don’t play with language for pure

pleasure alone, but to convey identity, to show belonging, to show we're on the same page as others" (Luu 2020).

Our paper aims at finding the sources of humor in a small corpus of linguistic memes (and their metalinguistic comments) excerpted from a specialized Facebook community entitled *The Language Nerds*; obviously, this corpus mainly represents the point of view of the linguistic purists and their amusing approach to faults and errors, since nowadays memes are the best vehicle to deliver both knowledge and humor using only a combination of text and image. We have chosen to maintain the original spelling in the memes and comments, even in those cases where the mistakes were not relevant for the context.

1. General linguistic memes

General linguistic memes are not related to any language in particular, but to language as a human faculty or to the relation between tradition and norm. Such memes approach universal issues in linguistics, such as the importance of pronunciation, spelling and grammar independently of the individual language. It is true, people on social media tend to sacrifice linguistic correctness to speed, economy of effort or space. Besides, given the number of users that use social media in one or more non-native languages, it is not a surprise that international languages, such as English or Spanish, for example, have their share of posts that are not as pristine as they could be. 'Grammar Nazis' have (ideally!) a difficult mission ahead of them: sanctioning the native speakers and kindly correcting the non-native speakers; generally (and surprisingly), many social media users take their time to check if someone is a native speaker or not and adapt their discourse to the particular case.

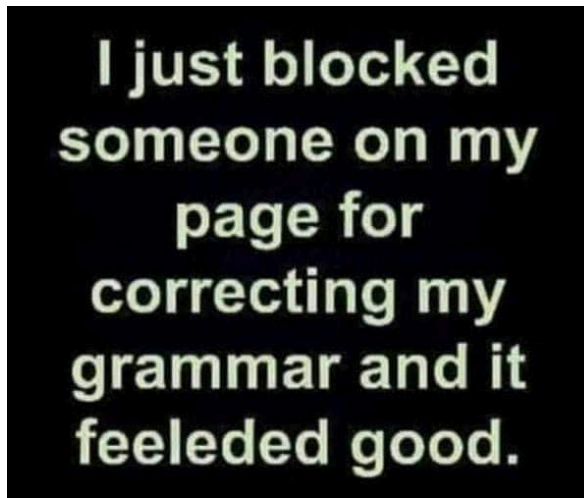
Sometimes, general linguistic memes are warnings about the importance of linguistic correctness; the meme below illustrates the dangers of linguistic inaccuracy and it does it in a humorous manner:



The image and the text are equally relevant in this meme, with the victim identified as *a meme with potential* and the aggressor as a **minor spelling error**. The humor in this meme is based on the homophony between the adjectives *minor* and *miner*, and the ambient of the image further supports the semantic deviation.

Many times, if a user corrects another user's spelling, grammar or vocabulary, it results in a conflict between the two persons, and usually more people take sides and participate in the linguistic war with arguments supporting one viewpoint or the other. Some state that linguistic correctness is important in any circumstances; besides, the social media pages or apps have tools for proofreading, so it up to the user to take the time and post a reviewed comment. On the other side, some argue that correcting someone else is patronizing and arrogant, that the topic of the post is more important than the linguistic issues, that everybody makes mistakes a. s. o. Since the conflict takes places in the virtual space, the easiest way out is to delete the comment and/or block the 'enemy'.

The meme below points at the solution above: apparently, someone was aggravated by another user who corrected their grammar and they blocked that user:



Certainly, this meme is a joke, and its humor resides in the clash between the content of the meme and its expression, i. e. between the apparent frustration of the author and the flagrant grammatical mistake in the last line: not only they pretend they ignore that *to feel* is an irregular verb, but added the past suffix *-ed* twice.

The comment section addresses the particularities of the English language, so most of the comments are not about general linguistics, but a certain language in particular. This happens due to the specific mistake in the meme: several users adopted the pattern and left their own comments that included the same type of errors, with an inexistant verbal form constructed from the present tense and the suffix *-ed*: *I betted it doested* ("I bet it did"), *I feel gooder after readed this* ("I feel better after reading/ I read this"), *So funny i almost dieded* ("So funny I almost died"), etc. Another user created a

regular future tense, purposely ignoring the phonetic changes that took place over time: *I **willn't** deny it* (“I won’t deny it”).

Regularized forms of comparative and superlative were also a popular twist in the comment section; the English adjective *good* and its degrees of comparison *better* and *best* are suppletive forms (and so are *bad*, *worse*, *worst*), so the regular forms employed by the users are part of the linguistic joke: *I feel **gooder** after readed this* (“I feel better after reading/ I read this”), *And the next time you do it it will feel **gooder*** (“And the next time you do it it will feel better”), *The **goodest** idea you could haved* (“The best idea you could have”).

For other users, spelling was also an option for their jokes, along with those mentioned above, such as in: *Feeleded **awesum*** (“Felt awesome”), *I honestly doesn't care about **gramer*** (“I honestly don’t care about grammar”), *It felts good to doing that **someteams*** (“It feels good to do it sometimes”).

Finally, several users noticed the ambiguity residing in the homonymy/homophony or paronymy between certain verbal forms: *felt* (past tense and participle of *feel*; also infinitive of the verb *to felt*), *feel-fill*, *felt-fell*, etc., so their jokes are based on the phonetical resemblances and confusion: *It **felts** good to doing that **someteams*** (“It feels good to do it sometimes”), *You mean: "It **feltd** good!"* (“You mean: «It felt good!»”), *You mean ***Filled** Good* (“You mean Felt Good”), etc.

The next meme is also a general linguistic meme, drawing on the same conflict between negligent or illiterate users and the ‘Grammar Police’:



The humorous twist in this meme is similar to the previous one, but somewhat subtler: the misspelling of the term *Facebook* might go unnoticed. Sometimes, hybrid memes (image and text) might favor one component over the other; such is the case with this meme, which has an extremely disturbing image, so the impact of the visual component is stronger than the impact of the linguistic one. For example, one user chose to ignore the text altogether, purposely or not, and commented: *No that's the Nordic acupuncture*, and

another puts an ironic twist in their comment: *That is incorrect. FB has the nicest ppl* (“That is incorrect. Facebook has the nicest people”).

Still, several users pointed out to the spelling error, and one of them left a humorous interlinguistic comment: *Facebok? is that the South African version?*; indeed, the sonority of the form *Facebok* is consistent with Afrikaans, a linguistic variety derived from Dutch (actually, the word *bok* does exist in Afrikaans, and it means “goat”).

There are quite a few general metalinguistic comments; the next one refers to the linguistic tools that are available on Internet pages or apps: *If you're afraid of committing spelling mistakes like me, consider using autocorrect. It's wonderful and certainly never makes write anything I didn't Nintendo.* (“write anything I didn't intend”). Many times, spelling errors are blamed on autocorrect, which, more than a useful tool, has become a scapegoat. Though it is true the suggestions of the autocorrect tool may sometimes lead to mistakes like the one purposely created above, the so-called ‘Grammar Police’ insists that the users be more vigilant and proofread their texts before sending or posting them on social media.

As with any meme written in a certain language, numerous comments will point to specific matters of that particular language; such is the case with the following comments, which pinpoint several common mistakes in English: *I say maximum number of arrows should be reserved for those who use **you're** vs **your** and **there** vs **their** vs **they're** wrongly and No, this is me when I correct some who said "**would of**".* Oddly enough, the linguistic mistakes made by the native speakers are also brought to attention by non-native speakers, who have the advantage of learning that language in a controlled environment and with a conscious intention to do so.

There are also a few comments that base their humor upon phonetic ambiguity; the relation between English spelling and pronunciation is rather opaque, since it depends both on the etymology of the words and the typology of the English language, which shows tendencies towards the isolating type and, therefore, allows the presence of numerous monosyllabic words and homophony: *Eye have know clewe what yew harr talking a bow't* (“I have no clue what you are talking about”).

2. Monolingual linguistic memes

This type of memes is usually based on analogy or ambiguity resulting in linguistic puns, as we have pointed out above, in the analysis of the comments to the general linguistic memes. Monolingual linguistic memes are impossible to translate, since they are based on specific features of a language, such as puns, spelling, overall sonority of that language or culturemes. Nevertheless, “the remarkable thing about internet memes is that without constant mutation through wordplay, they become, ahem, meme-ingless—less successful linguistic fads. Stagnant, unfashionable memes eventually go extinct” (Luu 2020); adaptation of monolingual memes is not always impossible, since sometimes a good translator finds way to identify an equivalent cultureme accordingly (Seiciuc 2016).

The first meme was originally a short linguistic sketch; the screenshots below capture the most relevant lines in the video, a dialogue between a nurse and her patient, a woman who gave birth to twins while she was in a coma, so her brother was the one who named the babies (in the spirit of the so-called ‘dad jokes’).



The humor in this meme resides in the formal similitude between the name *Denice* (Denise?) and the common noun *the niece*, which does not give away the unexpected; the punch line makes listeners reconsider the first impression and perceive the ambiguity in the context.

The pun in the sketch becomes the pattern for other puns in the comment section; one user affirms: *At least he didn't name them *Dawan* and *Da'otha'wan** ("The one" and "The other one").

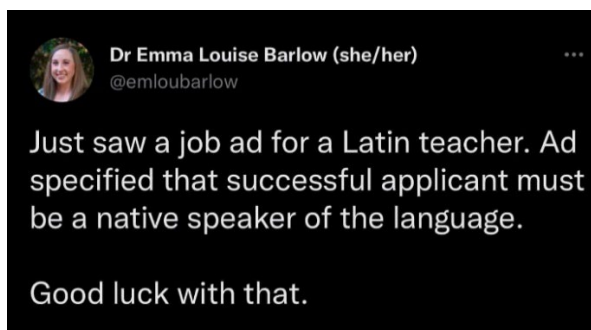
The next comment elaborates on the spelling/ pronunciation issue with a personal story: *When my daughter was born my brother-in-law visited us in the hospital and asked what we planned to name her. Since it was near Christmas I said "Gabriella Noel." He instantly replied "You can't spell Gabriella without an L." She is named Gabriella Marie.* This hilarious confession is centered on the confusion between the proper name *Noel* and a metalinguistic explanation: *no L*, hence the reaction of the brother-in-law.

Another personal story comes from a woman whose last name is *Rush*: *Right after I got married, I told someone my new married name and they spelled it back to me as verification. I said, "Am I what?";* again, this is a metalinguistic joke based on the similitude in the pronunciation of the proper

name *Rush* and the pronunciation of its spelling: *R, U, S, H*, which sounds like *Are you a sage?* or some similar question.

The section of users' comments contains several puns based on the spelling/ pronunciation ambiguity, but there are also a few puns that refer to the lexical level, such as the 'dad joke' posted by another user: *A women went into labor in the car, so her husband named the boy "Carson"*; the humor resides in the homonymy between the proper name *Carson* (which actually exists) and the false compound *carson*, from *car* and *son*.

Most monolingual memes are about the particularities of English or Spanish, the two international languages with the higher number of native and non-native speakers. Certainly, there are monolingual memes in every language that has social media users, but they cannot go viral the same way as the English or Spanish ones do. But sometimes, a cultural approach regarding a language is enough for a meme to be widely appreciated and distributed, even if that particular language has zero users:



In this context, the absurdity of the ad is the main source of humor, since native speakers of Latin are long gone, and the users capitalize on that in their comments.

One user posted a university rhyme attributed to a student of Latin philology at the University of Boston: *"Latin is a language as dead as dead can be, first it killed the Romans, now it's killing me"*. The struggle with Classical Latin declensions and conjugations is well-known among philologists all over the world, so, even though the comment does not exactly reply to the meme, we still consider it deserves its place in our analysis.

Several users point to the obvious, but they do it in a hilarious manner: one user asks *do they use seances instead of zoom for classes?*, and someone adds, philosophically: *That explains why my professor is old...* There is another user who responds with a meme that also point to the absurdity of the ad:

Teacher: The best way to learn a language
is to talk to a native speaker

Latin students:



A few users address the main question raised by the meme: who can apply for the position? One user suggests that *Some foundling who was raised by a group of monks that all had different native languages and used Latin to speak to each other will end up applying for the job*, while another thinks of *Someone born and raised in the Vatican*; they also continue with a cultural punchline: *it would be quite suspicious if you think about who their parents are, though...*, in reference to the celibacy of Catholic priests and monks.

3. Bi- or multilingual linguistic memes

Idioms, jokes, clichés or proverbs warning about other communities, especially those about the neighboring traditional enemy, are a constant in every human culture. Negative alterity is a fact, and the contemporary tendencies towards Europeanization or globalization, along with the policies we know as political correctness, have not been successful in their attempt to eradicate xenophobia completely: the linguistic inventory of idioms and proverbs is based on century-old traditions and the clichés about the characteristics of other peoples are deeply rooted in the collective mentality of a community (Seiciuc 2009: 328).

There are some bi- and multilingual memes that fall in the category of metalinguistic memes, as they refer to bilingualism or multilingualism. The first meme in this category presents English in opposition to the rest of the languages; since English is the current *lingua franca*, proficiency in this language is taken for granted even outside the Anglophone areas, so, all of the sudden, it became an implicit language with no value of its own.



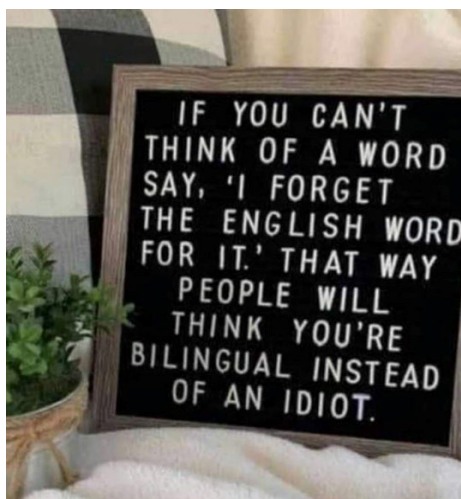
Matt Jenkins
@YoungFunE

...

Sometimes people who speak multiple languages won't even count English. I was talking to this guy and he's like, "I speak 5 languages. Spanish, French, Arabic, German and Russian. How many languages can you speak?"
I'm like, "None."

The numerous responses to this meme vary in content and expression. Many users followed the pattern created by the meme while sharing personal information about their proficiency in different languages (e. g. *Portuguese and none*, says one user), but then there are other reactions that come with a humorous insight on the matter of monolingualism versus bi- and multilingualism. One of the users writes: *It reminds me of the old joke: Trilingual = a person who speaks three languages Bilingual = a person who speaks two languages Monolingual = an American.* This is not surprising at all: on the one hand, for the Anglophones the knowledge of other languages is not a stringent necessity, since, as we stated above, they assume everybody else should speak English (and they are right most of the time). On the other hand, the American (US) education system has a bad reputation all over the Internet, and there are numerous memes, posts, even pages that offer arguments in favor of the cliché of the 'dumb American'. Apparently, the gap between the brilliant minds that form the leading echelon in international science and technology and the ordinary American is obvious to the rest of the world, especially since it is perceived as a consequence of the American patriotic concept of greatness, freedom and pride.

Another Anglophone user shares a meme as a comment, an irony directed against people who fake a competence they do not possess. Bilingualism is perceived as a particular form of intelligence:



Some Anglophone users chose self-irony for their responses, and offered hilarious explanations for the phenomenon described in the meme: *English isn't a language... its several languages in a trench coat* or *English is not a language. It is a drunken bar bet*. Humorous definitions of the English language, based on its history and characteristics, are scattered all over the Internet, such as *English is not a language, it is a gremlin that knocked over other languages in an alley and picked up the loose grammar* (Reddit), *English is not a language, it's three languages wearing a trench coat pretending to be one* (iFunny a. o.), *English isn't a language. It's 3 languages in a trench coat, mugging other languages in dark alleys for spare bits of grammar and vocabulary* (Steamcommunity), *English isn't a language. It's the bastard children of five different languages dressed up in a trench coat like Muppet Man* (Sciencebasedmedicine), etc. As Sam Glucksberg points out, "a central characteristic of much memetic humor is sociocritical commentary" (Glucksberg 1991).

For yet another user, the reaction to the meme is a very inspired interlinguistic pun: *Sounds like you speak nein languages!*. The humor in this comment resides in the presence of a false friend (Seiciuc 2017), an interlinguistic homophone: the English word *nine* is pronounced similarly to the German word *nein*, which means "no" or "not".

The next meme in this metalinguistic category is one which many of us can relate to, since it aims at the struggle multilingual people go through when they utter a foreign word in front of someone who does not speak that language, but knows and uses an adapted version of the word:



Amarens
@amarens

i feel like my whole multilingual
existence is choosing between
pronouncing things the ignorant way
or the pretentious way

Different languages have different approaches towards loanwords (which may vary over time): some prefer to adapt the loans orthographically and phonetically, other keep the original spelling with slight adaptation to the phonological system of the target language, so there is always the question of pronouncing the unofficial adapted form or the correct foreign form; one user comments ironically: *The struggle is real. Do I give up and sound like a commoner or do I stay true to my über pretentious upbringing which never resulted in conflict?*

With America being the melting pot of so many different cultures, loanwords enter the English language at a fast pace, so the adaptation of such words is hard to control by an authority in linguistics; that is why one of the users remarks: *Well that's your fault for not being born 'Murican!* ("American").

The majority of the comments show that there are split opinions on the matter. For some users, communication is the main objective, so the discourse needs to be adapted to the competence of the receiver; for example, one user confesses: *I am italian, living in France, and it's a nightmare everytime I have to order italian food. Sometimes I have to try 3 or 4 weird variations until I find the wrong one that they would understand.* Other users are more specific about the adaptation of the discourse: *the way i navigate this is to seek easy comprehension. if broos-kett(uh) is gonna get me blank stares then I'm bruh-shetting my way to kingdom come. but if i am with an italian person i want to not sound like a fool in front of, i'll risk going with the italian pronunciation first, and then cave in;* in this example, the humorous focus is on the American pronunciation of the Italian word *bruschetta* [brus'ketta], implying the lowering of the vowel *u*, the palatalization of the group *ske* and the r-coloring of the final vowel *schwa*. Finally, for some of the users, maintaining the original pronunciation is capital, so they advise: *If someone calls you pretentious, just say, "That's a big word for someone who can't pronounce things correctly".*

The second category of bi- and multilingual linguistic memes is usually based on the differences between two or more languages, emphasizing on the particularities of one or another. The creators of memes take notice of the phonetical, morphological, lexical peculiarities of a language, then compare and contrast those with other languages, in an attempt to create a humorous effect.

We are all familiar with the video about the German word for *butterfly*; the video was synthetized in the hybrid meme below:



The humor in this meme is based on a cliché about the German language sounding brutal and aggressive; the success of this meme (and other alike) appears to demonstrate that there is a generalized perception on the harsh sonority of German, based, probably, on the movies depicting the Second World War, where the Germans were portrayed as cruel and violent. Since the meme above is deprived of the sound component, it is substituted by the visual one: while the faces of the speakers of other languages are serene and happy, the one that represent German is frowning and shouting. While the majority of users find this meme funny, others are offended by it or point out that it promotes a distorted perception on a language that is very pleasing to so many.

The meme above is based on a subjective perception that became an internal cliché in the last 70 years; but the objectiveness of the next one is obvious:



The success of this meme is based on a variety of factors; first of all, it is constructed on a fusion (or ‘mashup’) between several famous templates. The first and the last image belong to the “Woman screaming at cat” meme; the first

image shows actress Taylor Armstrong in an episode of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (Soen 2020), and Smudge, the Canadian cat, is her partner in the original meme (Forani 2019). The second image features Paul Teutul Sr., the owner of a motorcycle business, Orange County Choppers; the Discovery series *American Chopper* disclosed the extremely tense relation between Paul Sr. and his talented son Paulie, so the images of them yelling at each other became a meme known as the “American Chopper meme” (Yglesias 2018). Finally, the third of the images represents half of the meme entitled “Me explaining”, created by the juxtaposition of two random photos on the Internet, one of Quenlyn Blackwell, a Twitter influencer, and one of actress Shirlene Pearson; the latter is featured in this mixed meme.

Secondly, the linguistic part of the meme contrasts the morphological particularities of four languages: two Romance (French and Italian) and two Germanic (German and English). In the first three images the tension builds up, as the paradigm of definite articles becomes more complex and intricate, but the fourth image is anticlimactic, and that leads to the humor in this meme.

4. Conclusions

Linguistic memes seem to appeal to people independently of their mother tongue or cultural background. It is not surprising, though, since language is thought to be the definitory characteristic of any human community.

After analyzing a sample of the enormous corpus available on social media and other internet sites, we have been able to identify three main types of linguistic memes: general, monolingual and bi- or multilingual memes. Each category points to a different aspect in linguistics: the general memes concern the universals of language and its relation to orthography, the monolingual memes are based on the peculiarities of a particular language, while the bi- and multilingual memes focus on the discrepancies between two or more language at any level (phonetics, morphology, lexis, syntax, etc.). The sources of humor vary from one category to another, but they share in common the unexpected twist, which frequently becomes a pattern to follow in the comment section.

Users share their reactions to the memes in a variety of forms: some are matter-of-fact reactions to the content, other are personal experiences or creative twists on the text of the meme, and some comments are actually memes or have the potential to become new memes themselves.

The humor in linguistic memes and metalinguistic comments shows creativity and imagination, but is also a source for promoting cultural clichés, sometimes negative, to the future generations, which goes against the principles of mutual respect, acceptance and unity in diversity. The polemics started by certain linguistic memes demonstrate that there is a delicate balance between humor and disrespect, but, then, self-irony is always a dignified attitude, as long as it does not turn into self-deprecation.

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