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Digital humour as a discursive response: Drifting memes and chronotopes

It has been widely noted that many interactions in the digital sphere are characterized by extensive linguistic playfulness and other semiotic creativity (Vásquez 2019) that often results in the users' construction of complex forms of humour and participation in diverse humorous online discourses. In this area, much attention has been paid to memes as one of the most characteristic forms of multimodal digital humour (Shifman 2013). The creation, circulation and modification of memes is a communicative practice that provides not only mutual entertainment of the online crowd but can also express distinct socio-political meanings and indicate the ideological preoccupation of one's national/cultural community (Wiggins 2019), which is an issue that is addressed by digital humour research only infrequently.

This paper addresses the ways users employ multimodal digital humour not only for mutual entertainment but also for serious political commentary. Based on a qualitative analysis of 250 memes that provide such a 'discursive response' (Wiggins 2019: 52) to a single event – the mock Czech annexation of the Russian Kaliningrad (Královec) region in September 2022, the paper seeks to cast light on how such political humour develops and changes in time. The analysis reflects recent work by Attardo (2020) on memetic cycles and drifts, i.e. the gradual transformation of original memetic material by means of remixing and the creation of new memes. However, it employs a more sociolinguistic perspective in viewing the triggering socio-political event as a chronotope (Blommaert 2015, 2020), i.e. a timespace configuration of social meanings that are pinned to a specific socio-cultural and historical context that is recreated through diverse semiotic practices, including – in this case – the creation and circulation of memes.

The findings suggest that while memetic drift may be linked to a relatively predictable 'life cycle' of responsive digital humour (initial emergence, viral spread, recontextualization, and ultimately disappearance), the chronotopic configuration of the social meanings attached to a given phenomenon can undergo a similar transformation: e.g. starting from a discursive response critically mocking and delegitimizing a concrete social or political event to a mere intertextual echo, where the chronotope loses its original critical edge and becomes a playful element in the semiotic repertoire shared by a digital community.

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