MAKING SENSE? THE STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF DIGITAL MEMETIC NONSENSE

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This paper offers the first systematic analysis of 'digital memetic nonsense' – clusters of seemingly meaningless digital texts imitated and circulated by many participants. We evaluated this phenomenon through two conceptual lenses: theories on nonsense in the pre-digital age and the techno-cultural conditions that facilitate its contemporary formations. While memetic nonsense is a new, understudied phenomenon, nonsensical utterances have been part of human culture for centuries and have received considerable scholarly attention. During these years, three main perspectives of nonsense have emerged: (1) Nonsense as *lack of meaning*, referring to the abandonment of any pretense of saying something substantial about the world (for instance, in the case of "empty" imitation, or "pastiche" [Jameson, 1991]); (2) Nonsense as *play with meaning*, namely the redesign and manipulation of given meaningful structures (for example Edward Lear's limericks [Rieder, 1998]); and (3) Nonsense as *deconstruction of meaning* – defying meanings by dismantling them, often undermining social and textual hierarchies (For example, the criticism of Victorian England imbedded in Lewis Carol's Alice books [Rackin, 1991]). "Meaning" in these veteran definitions relates mainly to what we label as "referential meaning", in which demarked phenomena in the world are pointed out to through signs. However, as elaborated in the full paper, we draw on Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) work on affect to suggest that another type of meaning – labeled by us as "affective meaning" – is particularly relevant for understanding digital nonsense.

When re-examining the classic definitions of nonsense in digital contexts, we also highlight the relevance of three features of such environments to the augmented formation of nonsense: *visual dominance*, which enhances the creation of liquid texts that are hard to anchor to a specific context (Barthes, 1978); *remix culture*, characterized by constant manipulations of and combinations between texts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008),

often blurring the meaning of the texts being remixed; and *phatic communities*, which highlight the pivotal social functions of new media, in which texts often serve more as means of bonding than as carriers of referential meanings (Miller, 2008).

Nonsensical texts in these environments often take the form of memes – clusters of digital texts imitated and circulated by many participants (who, for instance, put their heads in freezers or pretend to be owls). Memes strongly embody the three aforementioned features of digital environment: many of them are visual, they are often based on remixes, and they are used for community-building purposes (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013). We ask three questions about these texts: (1) What are the main structures, or sub-genres, underpinning digital memetic nonsense? (2) How do they relate to both the old formulations of nonsense and the features unique to digital media? (3) What are the overarching implications of these changes on the meaning and functions of contemporary nonsense?

To address these questions, we first screened 350 memes selected randomly out of a list of "confirmed" memes in the popular database "Know Your Meme." The authors and two independent coders separated nonsensical memes from sensical ones by distinguishing those that contain a clear referential meaning from those that do not. The screening phase resulted in the identification of 139 nonsensical memes, which were subjected to a grounded-theory-based analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). In addition, we also used a multimodal approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), focusing on the interrelation between the memes' visual and written modes.

Our analysis led to the identification and conceptualization of five distinct types of digital memetic nonsense: (a) *Linguistic silliness* depicts memes that undermine the rules of standardized language by distorting it. At the very same time, it invites people to learn the new lingo and become part of a community of its speakers. (b) *Embodied silliness* relates to memes in which the human body performs a variety of peculiar acts, such as dancing or singing. These bizarre uses of the body often pose a challenge to other people, either implicitly or explicitly, encouraging them to use their bodies in similar ways. (c) *Pastiche* refers in this context to texts that point to a textual source without adding any significant referential meaning to it. What such memes often express, however, is shared acquaintance with a certain genre, template or text. (d) *Dislocations* characterize the binding of unrelated textual elements in order to create decontextualized and humorous effects. (e) Finally, by *interruptions*, we refer to the use of memes by trolls (Phillips, 2015) to disrupt the flow of texts and online interactions in a way that undermines their coherence.

In each of these genres, we show how digital nonsense may potentially serve as a social glue that bonds members of phatic, image-oriented, communities. Thus, for instance, silly languages cannot exist without a core of participants mastering the vernacular and pastiche is based on a shared acknowledgment of a text. If, in the past, nonsense was depicted in both intellectual terms, as defiant deconstruction of meaning, and in playful/social terms, its current memetic manifestations lean heavily toward the latter. This shift from an intellectual approach to a more communitive one turns digital nonsense from

a reflection on "referential meaning" to a generative source of "affective meaning", which marks the ongoing formation of social connections preceding cognitive understanding.

Nonsensical memes are thus the result of everlasting processes, devoid of any intent to reach mutual consent. Yet doing it "for the lulz" (Colman, 2014; Phillips, 2015) does not merely reflect people doing silly things over the internet. Quite the contrary; the creation of texts for their sheer enjoyment is subversive, as it liberates participants from the burdensome obligation to generate new meanings. Moreover, this obliteration of referential meaning may enable the creation of inclusive communities: as perpetual empty templates, nonsocial memes can potentially include anyone and anything, allowing a variety of participants to express their quirky creatively without being sanctioned. Future studies could determine how, and to what extent, this potential is realized.

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