Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes

Ryan M. Milner
College of Charleston
USA
rmmilner@cofc.edu

Abstract

This paper argues internet memes – discursive artifacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way – weave 'fixity' and 'novelty'. Memes are a form of 'vernacular creativity', which balance the familiar and the foreign, the collective and the individual. In order to assess this balance, I undertook a yearlong multimodal discourse analysis of the networks of mediated cultural participation that house memes. Analyzing memes on sites like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr, I found they depend upon 'prepatterning' from social contexts understood by the collectives creating, reappropriating, and sharing them. While this prepatterning fixes the conversation and restricts participation, it also affords depth and expression. Understanding fixed conversational contexts means novel expression translatable to a receptive audience. In this way, memes are a 'media lingua franca', discourses understood by a far reaching collective. Two case studies – 'Kanye Interrupts' and 'Not Bad Obama' – support this assertion.

Keywords

internet memes; fixity; novelty; vernacular creativity; intertextuality
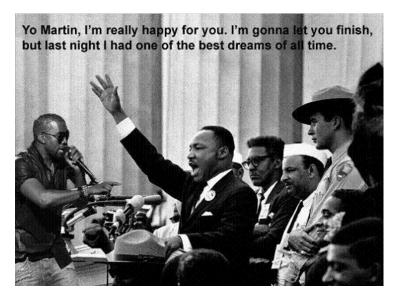
Nationwide Inside Jokes

Figure 1: Kanye West is 'photoshopped' interrupting Martin Luther King, Jr. during his famous 'I Have a Dream Speech'. A caption connects the two media moments.

Once in class – with a photoshopped picture of Kanye West interrupting Martin Luther King Jr. on the screen behind me (Figure 1) – I asked my students to define 'internet meme'. There was the usual desk staring, until a student in the back spoke up. "It's like...a nationwide inside joke," she said. Her unconventional definition inspired chuckles. But as the hours wore on, I realized its prescience. 'Internet memes' – discursive artifacts spread by mediated cultural participants who remix them along the way – balance the familiar and the foreign. They're at once universal and particular.

Memes intertwine what Tannen ([1989]2007) calls 'fixity' and 'novelty'. In this way, memes are a multimodal dialogue between individual creator and popular imagination. They're a form of mediated,

populist 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2007) that depends on a balance between the new and the expected. This paper is about that balance, about how memes function from the shared and the unique.

Tannen ([1989]2007), in her analysis of intertextuality and repetition in dialogue, claims that it's "the play between fixity and novelty that makes possible the creation of meaning" (p. 49). Our conversations are a fluid blend of 'prepatterned' templates – tropes, colloquialisms, conversational sequences – and individual expression appropriating those prepatterned templates.

Far from reducing discourse to mere formula, Tannen argues it's "the eternal tension between fixity and novelty that constitutes creativity" (p. 29). Understanding patterns and precedents in discourse well enough to violate them, reappropriate them, or contrast them is the basis of irony, humor, and commentary. This is true in Tannen's conversations, in a classic novel, or in what Burgess (2007) calls 'vernacular creativity'. Vernacular creativity is "not elite or institutionalised; nor is it extraordinary or spectacular, but rather is identified on the basis of its **commonness**" (p. 32, original emphasis).

Discourse uses fixity and novelty to weave together cultural precedent and individual expression. This interrelationship allows memes to function as a 'media lingua franca', where individuals can express themselves in an understood vernacular. Getting the 'nationwide inside joke' of memes means adhering to broadly accepted aesthetic practices and touching on resonant cultural moments. The 'media lingua franca' is decided by social process. The following section will exemplify this process.

Prepatterning Memes

To evaluate the balance between the familiar and the foreign in internet memes, I undertook a yearlong multimodal discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) of the 'net culture' hubs where participants create, reappropriate, and disseminate memes. I steeped myself in sites like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr in order to assess the aesthetics and practices constituting these participatory artifacts.

'Internet memes' are a diverse category (see Shifman, 2011, and her study of YouTube memes). What they have in common is a balance between individual novelty and vernacular fixity. As mediated conversations, they depend upon a prepatterning that emerges from social context.

For instance, to 'get' the 'inside joke' of Kanye West interrupting Martin Luther King Jr., participants need to grasp fixed references. They need to understand King's iconic 1963 speech advocating racial equality. They need also understand to West's infamous 2009 'interruption' of Taylor Swift, who was accepting an MTV Video Music Award. West unexpectedly charged the stage, told Swift that 'Imma let you finish', and then chastised Swift's win over a Beyoncé video, which he dubbed one of 'the best of all time'.

Footage of the interruption spread and a meme was born. As soon as the moment happened, it was open for reappropriation by countless participants in networks of mediated cultural participation. Not only did 'Imma let you finish' enter popular vernacular, West was used to memetically wreck a multitude of cultural touchstones (Figure 2).
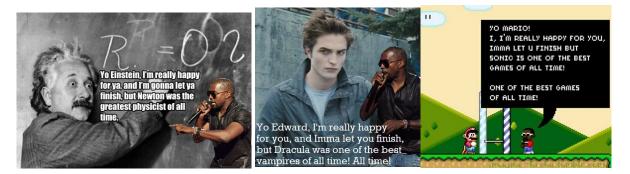

Figure 2: Kanye West 'interrupting' Einstein as he formulates his theory of relativity, Edward from *Twilight* to critique his vampire prowess, and Mario from *Super Mario World* on the quality of his videogame.

Mediated participants created their own images, intertwining cultural references with West's memetic moment. Once participants got the inside joke, West could be implemented into countless scenarios. His figure was spun and posed (and even translated into sixteen bit) to fit a visual frame; the caption above his head was be modified to match. Novel expression could occur within a relatable 'lingua franca' as diverse participants crafted from a shared premise.

Prepatterning means restrictions on participation, but also affords depth and expression. Memes rely on vernacular creativity other participants can readily understand. In this way, the 'everyday' is not universal, but situated. This fits with Burgess' (2007) claim that vernacular creativity is grounded in 'contextual specificity'.

For instance, the popular 'Rage Comic' meme aesthetic – stick figures conveying basic human emotions remixed into 'everyday' narratives – is simple. However, it's also the foundation for intricate expression necessitating deep intertextual understanding. This unconventional 'free handed' Rage Comic posted to Reddit is a case of intricate vernacular creativity (Figure 3).
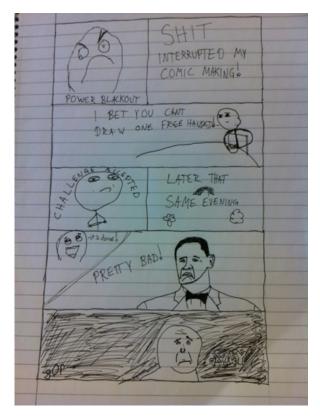

Figure 3: A hand drawn 'Rage Comic'; an analogue version of a mediated memetic artifact.

This comic is a simple drawing, but not necessarily a simple text. To understand the meta joke, readers have to be able to translate the crude analog representations of common mediated 'Rage Faces'. If readers are not familiar with the emotions typically conveyed by these faces, their hand-drawn doppelgangers are less discernable (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Popular memetic 'Rage Faces', conveying emotions (left to right) of anger, bewilderment, motivation, elation, and resignation. They correspond respectively to panels one, three, four, six, and eight in Figure 3.

These Rage Faces are remixed into countless comics and shared by countless participants. The 'hand drawn comic' adds a novel take on fixed characters.

The most distinct translation may be the 'Pretty Bad' face in panel seven. The punch line of the work is that the hand drawn comic is so inferior, a 'Pretty Bad' face must replace the more-familiar 'Not Bad Obama' face (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The 'Not Bad Obama' Rage Face, used to express begrudging acceptance or approval.

Understanding the 'Pretty Bad' play on 'Not Bad Obama' is key to the comic, and requires translating a novel image back to a more subculturally fixed one. But the reference is even more intricate if participants understand the face's origin. It's a Reuter's photo turned Reddit Rage Comic (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The Rage Comic that birthed the 'Not Bad Obama' Rage Face from a press photo.

These intertextual threads are strands that elaborate a memetic tapestry. More strands intertwine and the 'inside joke' grows more complex even as it spreads.

The visibility of memes means even complex references are often read broadly. 'Not Bad Obama' became recognized enough that President Obama himself added a thread to the meme's tapestry. When Obama answered questions on an 'Ask Me Anything' Reddit thread he referenced the image born of his likeness. Among his comments: "By the way, if you want to know what I think about this whole Reddit experience - NOT BAD!". Two fixed words, layered and shared through a media lingua franca

Media Lingua Franca

On the networks of mediated cultural participation that produce memes, proficiency in fixed conversations and contexts is required for entry into the discussion, and vernacular novelty is required to create and innovate from familiar forms. Though participants can and do hail from diverse locations, they can innovate from accepted practices during their mediated interaction.

Through novelty and fixity, memes can become a lingua franca for mediated cultural participation. They're a 'common language' to have discussions spanning vast geography. They can be used by a student to comment on Kanye or by a President to affiliate with a populous. They're constructed socially. After all, "through prepatterning, the individual speaks through the group, and the group speaks through the individual" (Tannen, [1989]2007, p. 100). Thanks to the balance between fixity and novelty, a memetic joke can be nationwide and inside.

References

Burgess, J. (2007). *Vernacular creativity and new media.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Shifman, L. (2011). An anatomy of a YouTube meme. *New Media & Society, 14*(2), 187-203. doi: 10.1177/1461444811412160.

Tannen, D. ([1989]2007). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. Los Angeles: Sage.

License