

## FROM SCRIPT TO LAUGHTER: ANALYZING LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH AND URDU MEMES

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### Abstract

*Memes have entered our online culture across all social media platforms in contemporary digitalized settings. They have developed into a special form of communication that allows internet users to openly share their ideas, jokes, criticisms, and other opinions. As one of the internet's communication phenomena, this study focuses on English and Urdu memes and the unique language characteristics that make them more fascinating from a linguistic perspective. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (Raskin & Salvatore, 1991) has been used for analysis to discover these features. For the analysis, five memes from both languages, English and Urdu, were chosen. The memes that take the shape of visuals with text on them have been the main focus of this research. The use of language for humor and its implications for conveying a message in a social setting is highlighted in this study. The findings showed that the deliberate use of sentence errors within memes illustrates their role in generating humor and fostering engagement. By employing unorthodox structures, memes prompt multiple interpretations and manipulate meanings through the strategic manipulation of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Urdu's national status boosts its coherence in mirroring Pakistani society, aiding relatability for locals compared to English memes.*

### INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by postmodernity, technological leaps abound. The globe contracts via scientific breakthroughs and the digital realm. Novelty dwindles as social media interconnects the planet at our fingertips, endowing even a handheld device with the world's scope. The internet wields transformative power, fostering seamless sharing, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Memes, emblematic of this phenomenon, spread across mediums, reflecting evolving contexts and diverse sentiments. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, social media's influence resonates profoundly, amidst a linguistically intricate society. English facilitates opportunities, while Urdu nurtures heritage and familial values (Ashraf, 2018).

According to Davison, an internet meme is "a piece of culture, usually a joke, which develops influence through online transmission." Humor is prevalent in all online memes. They have become "the trademark of the twenty-first century" in social media online culture. They are a vital component of modern social media culture. Meme pages such as Mangobaz, Sarcasmistan, and Lateffon Ki Dunya on Facebook, are dedicated solely to the creation and distribution of memes on social media. Enjoying and sharing memes with others has become a social media habit, particularly on Facebook (Davison, 2012).

There is a meme theory that claims that it is through the process of imitation that skills, ideas, or behaviors are transferred between people. This theory works within the realms of social media to evolve modern culture. Now, we can investigate the social media environment where the public can share their ideas and create social, political, and environmental movements, etc. People make creative content in the form of memes which is their artistic representation of imitating and replicating concepts (Hurren, 2019). Moreover, memes can be found in all online information

formats, including images, text, audio, video, and their combinations. The most widely used memes take the shape of digital photos with captions that include slang, poor grammar, and other errors. Additionally, the context of original memes frequently changes and can be related to a wide range of linguistic points of view to sociological perspectives.

Memes have not even spared politicians, each misstep, guffaw, and misspoken word is immediately weaponized online by turning it into memes in the form of scathing images. They usually make us laugh. Bilawal Bhutto's commentary on rainwater flooding in Karachi in 2019 was immediately turned into memes and which also resurfaced in 2020's monsoon season (Bokhari, 2020).

Due to the fact that it is the first study specifically on Urdu memes, this study is noteworthy in and of itself. This study serves as a starting point for additional inquiry into the topic in Pakistan. This study highlights the significance of Urdu as our national language. Where its positive attitude is made clear and its inventiveness has been properly analyzed. The study contributes to our understanding of the role that humor plays in communication in social contexts.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Here are various studies that relate to linguistics memes that amuse people and correspond to their grammatical and linguistic mistakes as well as to daily life, where they experience the same things and feel the same way.

According to Sojak & Olmsted (2019), the internet is a boundless space where constant changes occur in the language. The language patterns which we use daily and cannot let go of may become obsolete in weeks. A similar case is with the language used in memes which have been evolving. The researchers analyzed a meme which was in the form of an image of two dogs, an adult dog, and a puppy as shown in Fig. 1. On that image "you are doing me a frighten" is written in bold. If we look at its structure, it is grammatically wrong because normally "me" is used as a direct object in sentences. It is also common that the syntax is purposely altered wrong to make memes funnier. Such alteration of syntax is called doge syntax as shown in Fig. 2. For example; a meme image with a confusing dog face surrounded by mismatched modifiers like "so cereal", "much morning", "such awake", and "many sunshine".



Fig.1. Meme with wrong grammar



Fig.2. Meme with doge syntax

Copula deletion is also a common phenomenon used in memes in which most of the verbs are omitted. The researchers analyzed the meme image of a dog named Nero in a little sweater. This image is overlaid with the text "he cold" which is the copula deletion of "he is cold".

Similar views were discussed by Shalevska and Stojchevska (2018) that the language used in memes contains many features which are extremely interesting from a linguistic point of view. In memes, mostly the vernacular English, jargon, pun and punning riddles, phrases from specific English dialects, slang, neologism and shortenings, incorrect spellings, wrong syntax, and intentional or unintentional grammatical errors are used. They can contain non-fixed text or fixed phrases created in the expected style. Their text can vary in size because it depends on its creator's

intentions. Sometimes it can be only a single word like "Me", which is used on certain image that relates to our ideas or states. In most cases, the original meme content is different from that of its use, but due to its linkage, the meme creators relate different fields by using specific still images to create memes. For instance, a meme built on an image from the famous movie franchise Lord of the Rings, in which one of the protagonist, Gandalf, proclaims that "You shall not pass!" takes the original context and mix it with the most famous immigration campaign by Donald Trump and the supposed "wall building" where a cut face of Trump is overlaid on that of Gandalf and "When Trump builds a wall" and "You shall not pass" is written in bold as shown in fig.3. When comparing some of the early memes to those developed today, it's clear that today's memes are far more complicated, both in terms of language and style.



Fig.3. "You shall not pass" meme

Mostly the meme creators use their own words called neologism. They often intentionally use slogans, clever a metaphor, fixed phrasal expressions, etc., and also swaps between lexical items. A meme creator uses their linguistic creativity which is especially prominent in memes that do not correspond to Standard English's rules and have their own rules for spellings and word order. This is apparent in LOLspeak, which is defined by the Urban Dictionary as writing words with different letters than the original spellings; or misspelling on purpose. Although they would spell differently, their pronunciation is the same as that of the original as shown in Fig. 4.



Fig.4. An example of LOLspeak

A meme in Fig.5. shows that some of the students want to look cool and don't know much about English or forms of English. They make things look very interesting by their accent which makes people wonder and laugh. It happens to so many students around the world. Here, this meme shows that the first image is showing a small brain scan with "who" and then there is "whom" in which the scan is creating a light that creates funny effects. And, then there is "whom'st" which is used for who or whom in the wrong way to make it look funnier, stylish, and shorter. The last "whomst'd" shows that a person using it is a superhero. These types of memes are used to target students saying that when a kid knows all kinds of different and difficult things it is important but valuable. Apart from all, when a kid knows a cool word in a good manner it is all that counts which means that it is very important and attractive to all people around them because it makes them popular more popular ("Whomst Chart | Whomst," 2018).



Fig.5. Meme Targeting Students by using Alienated Words

#### METHODOLOGY

The study focuses on linguistic analysis of internet memes, particularly those in English and Urdu. From the linguistic perspective, semantics, syntax, and grammatical memes were our concerns. The dataset contains 5 memes, of which 3 are in English and 2 are in Urdu, which we discovered after a careful review. The "General Theory of Verbal Humor" is used in this study to analyze memes' linguistic properties, with a focus on communication, pun, satire, and grammar.

#### Memes' Analysis

In the domain of linguistics, syntax acts as a framework for placing words and phrases in the right order. It takes into account factors like subject-verb agreement, object placement, and word order. In-depth study of the constituency, the skill of combining various words into a harmonic whole, becomes crucial, especially in the complicated mapping of complex sentences. It is a world where even the smallest word rearrangement can result in significant changes to the connotations of a statement. Wordsmiths who enjoy subtlety and those who use linguistic tricks for significant changes both adore this complexity (Ellis, 2022). The mystery of comprehension is then solved by semantics, which takes the front stage as it dissects the web of meanings associated with words and phrases and links linguistic patterns to the vague images that reside in native speakers' minds (Team, 2023). Accordingly, the chosen memes exist in the semantics realm, frequently juggling many meanings, a playground where a change in context can completely transform what is meant. The investigation of word patterns and the fusion of sentence components are guided by grammar as a linguistic lodestar, opening the way for the artistry of efficient communication. Following are the linguistic perspective memes which consist of 2 syntax memes, 1 from the English language and 1 from Urdu; 2 semantic memes, 1 from the English language and 1 from Urdu; and 1 grammatical meme from the English language, because in Urdu language, the grammatical deviation was not found as no experimentation is usually done in Urdu memes.

#### Meme on Teacher-Student Dialogue

The syntax used in memes can be used intentionally incorrect to make it look funnier. Here in this selected meme, a black kid's image is used. The text written on the memes is a dialogue between a teacher and a student where the teacher asks the student (black kid) 'Can you make a sentence starting with "Me"' to which the student replies that "Me I go suffer, I no go beg for bread". Here the memer has used incorrect syntax in the reply of the student. According to the general sentence



structure, a sentence cannot start with "Me", but in this meme, it might mean that self-centeredness of the memer is shown. Moreover, the black community is highlighted and their economic and social conditions are almost always worst and they suffer a lot and are humiliated. Similar humiliation is done to their language in this meme too by making its syntax pathetic. This might be to make the situation look funny, but this fact cannot be ignored it is used to degrade the use of the English language by black people.

Teacher: Can you make a sentence starting with "Me"

Me: Me I no go suffer, I no go beg for bread



Fig.6. Syntax Meme in English (Anthony,2021)

#### Meme on Bilawal Bhutto Slip of Tongue

PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari becomes a social media sensation after making a funny slip of tongue at a rally in Islamabad in 2022. It gained popularity on Twitter, the incident has generated memes throughout the internet. It makes sense that people from Karachi could experience some cold when they travel to Islamabad. "Taangien Kaanp Rahi Hain" is what he means that "Legs are shivering". In this case, "Kanpein taang rahi hain" means "Shivering legs are". Here, Bilawal's slip of the tongue is the much-needed respite from the political turmoil we were experiencing. This wrong syntax sentence meaning has been generalized since it got viral on social media that it is now used in various situations i-e alarming, threat, fear, etc. For instance, if a person has exams the next day and is afraid that he/she might not in the paper, so he/she can use this sentence "kanpein taang rahi hain" in that fearful situation to be relatable. Memers made millions of memes out of this slip of tongue as well as celebrities did too that is why it was trending on whole social media because such funny slip of tongue are not expected from any Pakistani.



Fig.7. Syntax Meme in Urdu (Alam, 2022)

### Meme on Double Meaning

In this meme below, three bottles of jam are personified where two are sitting on chairs and one is standing. The memer has written "JAM SESSION" on the meme image. This meme conveys two meanings. Firstly, the bottles of jams are jamming which means a concert or gathering when musicians jam or practice music together without any prior planning. Secondly, the "jam session" phrase shows the action of music practice by people. But, by looking to the overall meme, the jam bottles are highlighted and personified by the memer for creativity purposes as well as to lighten up the mood of the audience. So, the text depicts something else, but the bottles in the backgrounds change the overall meaning of the text.



Fig.8. Semantic Meme in English (Downs, 2019)

### Meme on Married Girls of Pakistan

In this Urdu meme below, three pictures of Pakistani actress, Zara Noor Abbasi, are used with text written on them as "ek taraf aba dusri taraf wo makhan ka daba or bech mai becheri" which English translation is "father on one side, that butter box on another side, and helpless woman in the middle". This written text is used from the perspective of Ms. Abbasi by the memer. The words like "Makhan ka dabba (butter box)" have two different meanings, firstly, it shows the simple butter box; secondly, it shows that Ms. Abbasi is referring to her husband as a "butter box". This meme has shown the helplessness of a married woman who loves her father and her husband too, and cannot decide whom she should follow. It is such a meme that many women can relate to.



Fig.9. Semantic Meme in Urdu (Awan, 2022)

### Meme on Back to School

In the meme below, the notification is made for the school children by the school which says "DEAR PARENT'S DON'T FORGET THE COOKIE'S". This sentence has grammatical mistakes in the words "parents" and "cookies". After reading the notification one can know that it is talking about all parents so the word "parent" should be made plural by adding "-s" to it at the end. And, similar case is with cookies too. But, instead of adding "-s" to it, an apostrophe "s" has been added in the text. So, this meme is hilarious because almost everybody knows the rules for making English words plurals. Moreover, it has also highlighted the importance of grammar that a small grammatical mistake can lead to huge misunderstandings and ambiguities.




Fig.10. Grammatical Meme in English (Burgess, 2017)

### CONCLUSION

The study focused on the English and Urdu language's memes. It mentioned the widespread usage of internet memes as a distinctive form of expression, especially among social media's users. This study highlighted the usage of unusual sentence structures inside memes to encourage audience engagement through ambiguity, highlighting the role of syntactic errors in creating humor and gaining popularity on social networks. These mistakes produced humorous misinterpretations and unexpected understandings by taking advantage of the possibility of various word interpretations. Intentionally changing syntax changed the meanings of texts, producing ironic or misleading results. This included things like spelling, apostrophe usage, and punctuation. This shows a transition in communication from written to visual, with memes reshaping digital interactions.

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