LEXICAL AMBIGUITY AS A SOURCE OF HUMOUR: THE CASE OF MEMES ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study is conducted to analyze lexical ambiguity in memes on Instagram. The method used in this study is qualitative-descriptive. 21 memes that were collected from August 2020 – August 2021 utilize ambiguous words. The results of the analysis show that lexical ambiguity can be applied as an element to add humor to memes. By taking advantage of incongruity theory, words that have multiple meanings are employed to create misunderstandings or mistakes that make the memes humorous.

Keywords: lexical ambiguity; memes; humor.

I. BACKGROUND

In the modern era like today, the internet has become part of human life. One of the functions of the internet is means of entertainment. According to Lani Sidartha (1996), the internet is a powerful virtual partner, which is commonly used in business, political, and even entertainment media.

One of the internets' means of entertainment is memes. Memes is defined as a unit of cultural information that is disseminated through imitation (Kara Roger, 2014). The term meme itself comes from the Greek language *mimema* meaning to imitate. It was introduced in 1976 by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his work "The Selfish Gene".

The term meme was then developed by Limor Shifman (2012) into *internet memes*. Shifman said that internet memes can be treated as modern (posts) in the form of "folk tales" that are built with norms and values through cultural artifacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends. Memes as a part of culture on the internet show a way in which ideas are imitated (imitation), disseminated and mediated from person to person through interaction or conversation, both through 'analog' and 'digital' media (Brunello in Dewi, 2017).

Memes have become popular because they can be the subject of jokes, satire, expressions of users' feelings in cyberspace, and this quickly becomes popular and endemic (Luthfi in Juditha, 2015: 106). Juditha (2015) also stated that memes can be used as entertainment because they are funny, contains parody and satire.

Internet memes are present in the form of a combination of images, photos, slides and texts which are intended to respond to an issue that is being discussed in social discourse. One of the many social media platforms that people use to share memes on the internet is Instagram. Instagram is a social media that displays various visual media, both images and videos. Instagram was created in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger.

Some of the memes shared on social media such as Instagram contain ambiguity, and ambiguity is often found in memes or jokes. Sentences containing jokes and humors often find their humorous power through ambiguity (Seewoester, 2009).

One of the theories related to humor that is often used in jokes is the incongruity theory. This theory explains that humor is present in situations when interpreting an unusual reality (Plessner in Lynch, 2005: 31). Something is considered funny if it is illogical or irrational, paradoxical, incoherent, erroneous or inappropriate.

Language is plural, it can cause semantic error and in general, semantic error occurs when two people communicate with each other, or when someone uses the same word for different meanings or two different words for the same meaning (Pateda, 2010:17). If there is ambiguity in a word, it is likely to confuse the reader. By doing this research on lexical level of ambiguity, it is hoped that readers can understand the context of the meme they see, so that the humor in it is conveyed properly. In addition, with a very large number of Instagram users that reached 1.07 billion active users, this research is worth to be conducted.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this study is qualitative-descriptive research. Qualitative research is used to investigate, discover, describe, and explain the quality or features of social influences that cannot be explained, measured or described through a quantitative approach (Saryono, 2010). Qualitative research examines participant perspectives with interactive and flexible strategies. Furthermore, descriptive method is also used to describe or explain an event, situation, object, person, or everything related to variables that can be explained using either numbers or words. It can

be said that descriptive research is research that seeks to describe a symptom, event or actual problem that occurs in a data (Setyosari, 2010).

The memes in this study are taken from several accounts on Instagram such as @9gag, @punhunonline, @drawtism, and @katalystcomics from August 2020 – August 2021.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following is an explanation and analysis of data related to lexical ambiguity for the purpose of humor in memes on Instagram taken during August 2020 – August 2021. The Oxford Online Dictionary of English is the primary source of reference for looking into the denotative and secondary meaning. The meanings of the words are also analyzed by looking into its' context.

Data 1

In the meme above, the word which is ambiguous is the verb *perform.* It exist in the sentence *Can you perform under pressure?* The denotative meaning of the word *perform* is working, carry out, complete, or fulfill an action, task, or function (Oxford Online Dictionary of English). The secondary meaning is to present or to show something in the form of entertainment

to the audience (Oxford Online Dictionary of English).

The question *Can you perform under pressure* is uttered by a woman, in the context of a job interview. The man who is being interviewed misrepresented the question. His response; *No, but I can try Bohemian Rhapsody"*, refers to the title song of the famous band, Queen. The answer from the man violates the purpose of the question. This is evident because of the ambiguity or double meaning of the word *perform.*

Ambiguity or double meaning in the meme is intentionally added to create humor. This duality of meaning creates confusion, and the resulting confusion is what makes the meme funny. This is known as incongruity humor or unexpected humor, where something can be considered funny if it is illogical or irrational, paradoxical, incoherent, erroneous, or inappropriate. The type of humor in the meme is verbal humor, because even though it is in the form of an image with text, the humor is in the pun (word play), not in the image. Without looking at the image, the meme can still be funny.

Data 2

In the sentence*; I'm gonna make you mine,* the pronoun *mine* have multiple interpretations. The denotative meaning of the word is a pronoun used to refer to something that belongs to or is related to the speaker. While the secondary meaning refers to the verb *mining*; digging in the ground for coal or other minerals from mining (Oxford Online Dictionary of English).

The meme actually refers to the secondary meaning which is mining coal. This can be seen from the image on the second panel of the meme. The setting in the second panel of the meme is a mining area, the clothes worn by the man and woman also look like mining workers wearing safety helmets and carrying tools to dig the ground.

When the man said *I'm gonna make you mine* to the woman in the first panel, the woman misinterpreted that she was being proposed by the man. It turns out, the man's intention was not to propose, but to make her work in the mines.

The ambiguity in the meme is intentionally added to create humor. The ambiguity causes misunderstandings to the woman, and it is the misunderstanding that makes the meme funny. This is known as incongruity humor or unexpected humor, where something can be considered funny if it is illogical or irrational, paradoxical, incoherent, erroneous, or inappropriate. The type of humor in the meme is non-verbal humor, because the form is an image with text.

Data 3

In the meme above, the word *frozen* is ambiguous. The denotative meaning of the word *frozen* is an adjective which refers to something that turns or is turned into ice or freezes as a result of a very high cold temperatures (Oxford Online dictionary of English). While the secondary meaning points to a noun which is an animated film called Frozen produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios.

When the man asked *What does Sophie want for Christmas?* and the woman answered *She,* (referring to Sophie) *loves anything frozen,* the woman was referring to the animated film Frozen. The clue is Sophie standing behind the woman wearing Elsa's dress. Elsa is the main character in frozen. Instead of getting the gift they wanted, the man did indeed give something 'frozen'. Unexpectedly, the something 'frozen' is chicken nuggets.

This misunderstanding is created because of the ambiguity contained in the word *frozen*. This misunderstanding is intentionally used to create humor in this meme. This is known as incongruity humor or unexpected humor, where something can be considered funny if it is illogical or irrational, paradoxical, incoherent, wrong, or inappropriate. The type of humor in the meme is also non-verbal humor.

Data 5

In the meme above, the word *letters* is ambiguous. The denotative meaning refers to the letters of the alphabet; a character that represents one or more sounds used in the language; alphabet letters (Oxford Online Dictionary of English). While the secondary meaning is a letter; means of written, typed, or printed communication, and sent in an envelope by post or messenger (Oxford Online Dictionary of English).

As stated above, the word *letters* refers to the letters of the alphabet. This is evident from the context itself; a man working on a crossword asks *Can you help me on my crossword? The clue is overworked mail man* to a woman. Since the question refers to a crossword question, the woman answered S*ure, how many letters?*, but the man answered *I'm guessing too many' with a smile.*

The mans' answer refers to the letters that the postman sent, who is exhausted from overwork. The answer from the man violates quality maxim because it does not actually answer the question. Again, this is known as incongruity humor or unexpected humor.

CONCLUSION

Memes are ideas, styles or behaviors that spread and circulate online through social networks from one person to another. Memes can become popular on the internet or in cyberspace because they can be the subject of jokes, parodies, satire, and expressions of the user's feelings in cyberspace. Memes which usually come in the form of an image with a text, contains humor and can act as entertainment.

Based on the discussion, it is evident that lexical ambiguity can be used as a source of humor in memes. All of the data explained above use lexical ambiguity purely for humor purposes. Words that have multiple meanings are used to create misunderstandings or mistakes that make the memes funny.

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