

**BSU International Journal of Humanities and Social Science**

**Available Online:** <http://buijhs.journals.ekb.eg/>

**Online ISSN: 2314-8810 Print ISSN: 2314-8802**



## **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED MEMES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

#### **ARTICLE INFO**

**Received**

2021-10-7

**Accepted**

2022-3-15

#### **Keywords**

meme, discourse  
analysis, mental  
model theory,  
multimodality,  
COVID-19  
pandemic

The aim of this research is to conduct a discourse analysis of selected internet memes that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in the span between March and May 2020 from a Cognitive Linguistics perspective. Data collection was restricted to memes featuring two common social phenomena: “virtual meetings” and “working from home”. A total number of 40 internet memes was collected via Google search and a representative sample of 14 memes was selected for analysis. The memetic discourse analysis explores the links between the macrostructures and the superstructures of the selected memes. The analysis is conducted within the frameworks of Mental Model Theory (van Dijk, 2014) and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2016). Findings of the research reveal that text and image complement each other in order to convey a sense of humor and that internet memes serve as a platform for projecting our ideologies in a satirical way. It is recommended that further research is conducted to explore the multimodal discourse-view nature of internet memes on other aspects of COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have tremendously impacted how media is produced and presented. Internet memes form one of the most popular forms of social media communication (Lou, 2017). They are rich concepts that spread quickly among community members since they are shared by internet users to communicate widely; the reader-viewers are invited as recipients to construct the meaning embedded in these visual representations (Anurudu & Obi, 2017; Osterroth, 2019). Internet memes have largely been viewed as embodiments of whimsicality and silliness. However, there are two reasons for focusing on memes as a genre. The first reason is that memes are considered tools of digital culture; they comment on social events in a satirical and entertaining way which makes it highly interesting for interpreters. The second reason is that the study of internet memes still merits further research (Abdel Raheem, 2020). Several scholars (Osterroth, 2019; Shifman, 2013; Shifman, 2014; Yus, 2019) have recently approached this complex phenomenon in variable ways adopting semiotic, multimodal, discourse analysis or cognitive approaches.

The term *meme* has originated from Richard Dawkins' studies concerning genetics and memetics. The term *meme* was first coined by Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. This term was previously used to describe the reduplication of genes in the human body:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches . . . memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which . . . can be called imitation (Dawkins 2006, p. 192).

In this way Dawkins referred to cultural values that move from one generation to another as memes. Memes represent cultural units that move from one person to another until they become shared social phenomena. This definition is also applicable to internet memes. The basic idea of a meme is inherent to an internet meme since a digital artifact that passes from one person to another or the one that users can alter and share is called a meme. The second point is that the term is open to all kinds of cultural practices since no semantic or pragmatic specifics are given (Anurudu & Obi, 2017; Osterroth, 2018).

However, recent work by Shifman (2014) and Wiggins and Bowers (2015) has revealed that the original definition of a meme partially applies to internet memes since the latter tend to refer to short-lived constructions that involve user-generated variations compared to the cultural units that Dawkins considered which spread relatively passively and largely unaltered over long periods of time. Internet memes can be defined as clusters of digital items that are circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users. They typically share common characteristics of form, and/or stance (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Shifman, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

The term *internet meme* has been used loosely to label any form of digital artefact; e.g., photo, video, text, etc. that is transformed by internet users when shared and transmitted online. A defining characteristic of internet memes is their template-like form which provides users with pre-existing forms to express new ideas and thoughts. A case in point is the Grumpy Cat meme with the pronounced frown of the cat which expresses anger and resentment. Users frequently superimpose text on the image to make the meme better fit into the relevant discursive context. This kind of verbal-visual memes commonly referred to as the *image macro* meme has largely proliferated in

social media discourse with millions of users ranging from teenagers to celebrities and politicians to disseminate ideas, thoughts and attitudes (Lou, 2017). Memes are artefacts that have both social and cultural characteristics and perform functions such as entertainment, protest, criticism or some commentary. Memes are never constructed by one user of the network; the meaning of such digital pictorial texts is usually one part of a collective discourse (Anurudu & Obi, 2017; Osterroth, 2018).

Internet memes “tend to form chains of successive responses, refashionings, recycling initial combinations to refer to new developments, current events, fashions, fads, and the like” (Dancygier & Vandelanote, 2017, p. 568). As Abdel-Raheem (2020) argues, such a definition matches van Dijk’s view that discourses are likely to presuppose and continue previous ones and, in this way, they form complex sets that are characterized by intertextual relationships. Moreover, memes are different from political cartoons since they are not illustrations and might be photoshopped pictures and they are typically characterized by the use of unconventional creative metaphors. Various kinds of text in memes include different participants: the meme maker, the meme character, etc. (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017).

Creating humorous content in memes relies on two basic elements. On the one hand, the understanding of memes requires that the conceptualizer is having some conventional knowledge. On the other hand, one additional component is the notion of incongruity, incompatibility or contrast inside or between conceptual frames of knowledge. Kant, the German theorist, explained that laughter is a response to an absurdity: we have a certain expectation but that expectation turns into nothing. Perceived incongruity is between a concept and the real world it represents. Examples of incongruities

are real vs. imagined, possible vs. impossible; socially neutral/ expected/ acceptable vs. socially unacceptable/ stigmatized/ taboo; natural v. constructed; logical incongruity or linguistic/ discourse incongruity (Latta, 2011). More than one of these instances of incongruity may be present simultaneously in a meme. Concerning the humorous effect, a meme typically involves certain incongruities which is probably a key component of the creation process since a meme includes two entities that are placed together and these are originally conceptualized as being distinct from each other (Ambrus, 2017; Kovecses, 2015).

Reviewing the literature on the analysis of internet memes adopting Cognitive Linguistics approaches has yielded several studies (Lou, 2017; Ostanina-Olszewska & Majdzinska-Koczorowicz, 2019; Martynyuk & Meleshchenko, 2019; Abdel-Raheem, 2019). However, little attention has been given to the complex relationships between memetic discourse and knowledge; i.e., how knowledge is presupposed, invoked, expressed or conveyed, etc. Therefore, it is claimed that more insight is needed for the analysis of memes adopting a cognitive Mental Model Theory (Abdel-Raheem, 2020). In addition, the multimodal nature of internet memes where the verbal and visual components interact to convey particular meanings still merits further research.

The aim of this research is to conduct an epistemic multimodal discourse analysis of some satirical internet memes that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in the span between March and May 2020. The memetic discourse analysis involves creating links between the semantic macro-structures (topics) and superstructures (organization). It is an attempt to investigate the relationship between verbal and visual aspects in projecting the

meaning intended by the meme makers. The analysis is built upon the frameworks of Mental Model Theory and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2016). The research purports to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways is knowledge managed (presupposed, expressed and conveyed) by the makers of the selected memes during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In what ways do the images and the linguistic expressions interact in projecting the intended meaning of the selected memes?
3. What are the Discourse Viewpoints of the makers of the selected memes?

Through targeting the cognitive properties of internet memes, this research is an attempt to fill in the gap in the literature regarding the little attention given to the role of knowledge in memetic discourse analysis and to extend the existing literature on the nature of internet memes as viewpoint-driven multimodal constructions.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1 Data***

Internet memes as data for the current study were collected systematically via Google search for COVID-19 memes in the span between March and May 2020, during the early months following the declaration of COVID-19 as pandemic, using some key words and phrases: COVID-19 memes, virtual meetings memes, working from home memes, etc. The collection of the memes was restricted to aspects of two widely common social phenomena that pervasively emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic:

“virtual meetings” and “working from home”. This yielded a corpus (n=40) of memes. Purposive sampling was conducted: a representative sample of memes (n=14) featuring the two topics equally were selected for analysis. The selected memes were then grouped by the researcher in terms of the type and format of the meme into five categories as follows:

1. *One does not simply* memes
2. *I don't ... But-*memes
3. *When-*memes
4. *Direct speech* memes
5. *Opposition* memes

## ***2.2 Theoretical Framework***

The memetic discourse analysis required establishing connections between the semantic macro-structure and superstructures. Identifying the semantic macro-structure involved identifying the topic(s)- what the discourse is about while identifying superstructures involves aspects such as construction grammar and multimodality; i.e., the links between the verbal/linguistic and visual/pictorial elements of a text. In conducting an epistemic multimodal discourse analysis of the selected memes, the researcher has drawn upon Mental Model Theory and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017).

### ***2.2.1 Mental Model Theory***

A mental model is the cognitive definition of consciousness: during each moment of one's life, the person and the immediate environment are represented as a mental model: Time, Place, Participants, in a Situation, Event of Action with Goals, etc. This would encompass everyday experiences

(Experience Models), more specific communicative situations (Context Models), what we talk about (Event or Situation Models). These are stored in episodic memory which is part of long-term memory with personal opinions, emotions, etc. Mental Model Theory is regarded as the basic idea of epistemic representations of the situations or events of the natural and social world. It is claimed that this theory affects the production and interpretation of text and talk; e.g., in storytelling, characterization, expository discourse, argumentation, etc. This theory which has been primarily used for analyzing verbal interaction can be effectively applied to analyzing visual and multimodal discourse. It is further argued that although memes have been investigated using various approaches, little attention has been given to the complex relationships between memetic discourse and knowledge: what knowledge of recipients is presupposed in internet memes? How do meme makers know what the recipients know? What do they know about the topics they present? Which information would they like to convey to the recipients? How do meme makers establish and continually update Common Ground taking into account the dynamic nature of memes in terms of reusing or recycling? etc. Mental models are built from external data (perception, comprehension, etc.) and generic knowledge (organized in schemas, scripts, frames, etc.). Knowledge structures of discourse also involve cognitive strategies like specification, selection and inference. The key overarching strategy of discursive communication is how old information is related to new information (Abdel-Raheem, 2020).

Therefore, more insight is needed for the analysis of memes adopting a cognitive Mental Model theory. The meme font may also contribute to the creativity of the meme. The consistency of the meme pattern in terms of a repeated picture, top/bottom text division is what gives the meme its



“constructional status” (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017, p. 579). In van Dijk’s terms, the schematic categories determining the overall organization of discourse are called superstructures. The essence of discourse theory is establishing links between semantic macro-structures (topics) and schematic superstructures.

The memetic context controls not only what is said in a meme but how it is said; i.e., the register or style associated with this genre in addition to the overall organization or format of the meme. Context models account for the ways in which internet users produce and interpret memetic discourse and how meme makers manage their knowledge during the production of memetic discourse. For instance, in *One does not simply* memes, the bottom text (BT) lines function as macro-semantic markers. These represent the semantic models- the situations the discourse is about. Typically, the text and the image are simultaneously processed and interpreted in multimodal humorous texts. The image may catch the reader’s attention first then the text is accompanied to such initial reading of the pictorial/ nonverbal part of the meme (Yus, 2018).

### ***2.2.2 Memes as View-point Driven Multimodal Constructions***

Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017) view internet memes as a novel communicative method that offers insights into the relationship between figurative language, viewpoint and embodiment. They argue that artifacts which combine images and linguistic expressions have become pervasively common to express viewpoints and that the study of the constructional and multimodal features of internet memes in particular offers a good opportunity for broadening the scope of constructional grammar and Cognitive Linguistics. They believe that construction grammar is actually the appropriate framework to approach the emerging trend of internet memes and

this framework can be expanded by accounting for the multimodal properties included. They think that images play different roles in their interaction with the text for the overall meaning of memes.

What makes internet memes *multimodal* in a particular sense is the interaction between linguistic and visual forms. Within the scope of Cognitive Linguistics, multimodality encompasses features such as co-speech gesture, eye gaze, facial expressions, posture, etc. alongside the linguistic channel. They believe that multimodality (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2001) requires more detailed analysis taking into consideration the diversity of the contemporary means of communication depending on novel combinations of image and text. They are characterized by being multimodal constructions where there is interdependence and interaction between the linguistic and visual forms. Without the picture, the text would most probably be incomplete and unintelligible, though the verbal part is often presented in a shortened form without the application of grammatical rules. The text usually acquires a different meaning when combined with a certain image, referring to a well-known and popular semantic framework.

Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017) identify memes as multimodal forms with identifiable meanings, categorized as *constructions* in terms of construction grammar. Constructional meaning can be identified even when some of the formal parts of the full construction are missing. In addition, salient characteristic constructional features stimulus broader frames of constructional meaning. This can be referred to as constructional compositionality. For the purpose of ‘unpacking’ meanings, the recipients of memes use frame metonymy which involves identifying frame elements that are clear enough to allow the entire context and the behaviour of the

participants to be understood. When memes are analyzed, the conceptualizer cannot separate them from their cultural associations and connotations. One's perspective of a meme depends on opinions, beliefs, stereotypes and cliches common to a certain group of people for the reason that they are never constructed by a single internet user. Memes also allow the recipients to modify or transform the original meaning. Memes are multimodal constructions since they largely depend on the narrative perspective of a specific context or culture. They usually carry some background meaning; they refer to previous versions of the meme and take part in the previous ones and, moreover, they create a network of concepts and references to the situations or context they are referring to (Ostanina-Olszewska & Majdzinska-Koczorowicz, 2019).

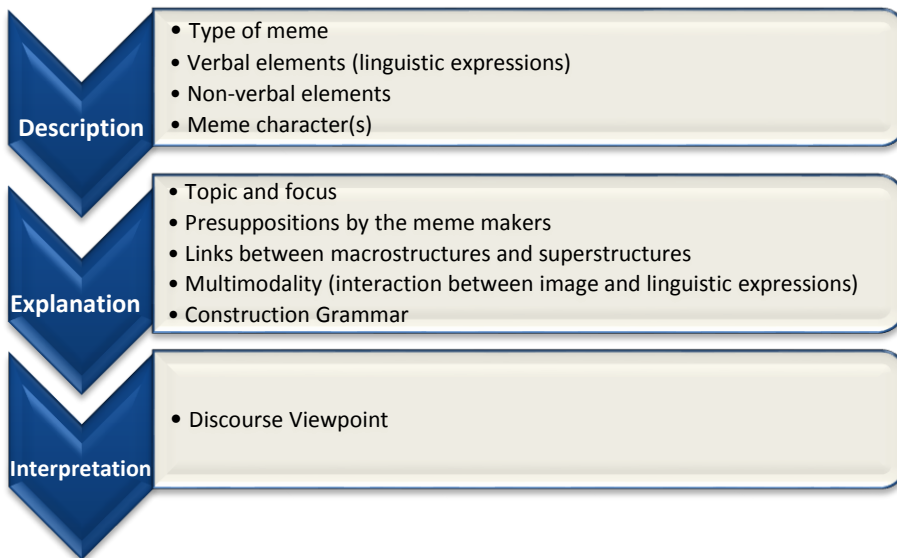
Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017) stress the importance of viewpoint in analyzing memes which usually relies on pre-existing beliefs and attitudes and manipulating point of view in order to build a newly construed viewpoint which is a sarcastic one. There are two interrelated aspects that emerge here. One is that the viewpoints take into consideration and account for attitudes, stereotypes, cliches assumed to be shared or at least known by the addressee and are thus intersubjectively created. Second, memes are likely to form chains of successive responses, recycling initial combinations to refer to current events, fashions, new developments, etc. Therefore, internet memes cannot be studied in isolation as individual phenomena. They are part of complex networks not only of previous examples of the same meme and novel mixed combinations of existing memes, but also of various non-memetic constructions; examples are films, photos, ads, iconic figures, etc. The final interpretation emerging out of this network can best be recognized as some supervisory mental space that can be termed the Discourse Viewpoint.

### 2.3 Procedures of Analysis

A qualitative approach was adopted by the researcher in analyzing the selected memes. As illustrated in Figure 1, the memetic discourse analysis involved three stages: Description, Explanation and Interpretation:

**Figure 1**

#### *Procedures of memetic discourse analysis*



The first stage included an objective description of each of the memes selected for the study. The description included identifying the type of the meme, commenting on the verbal and non-verbal elements and describing the meme characters. The second stage included identifying the presupposition(s) made by the meme maker, the semantic macro-structure and superstructures of each of the memes under study in addition to the links between verbal and non-verbal elements (multimodality) and the construction grammar of the meme. Finally, the third stage included identifying the Discourse Viewpoint of the meme maker.

### 3. Data Analysis

### *3.1. One does not simply memes*

The first category of the selected memes is *One doesn't simply* memes. Each of the memes below (Figures 2a, 2b and 2c) belongs to the *image macro* type of memes where there is top text (TT), bottom text (BT) and a background image. Each of these contains three elements: a background image, a TT line and a BT line where both the image and the TT “ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY” are constant. The BT varies from one meme to the other: in Figure 2a it is “WORK FROM HOME WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS”, in Figure 2b “SET UP A ZOOM MEETING” and in Figure 2c “CRASH A ZOOM MEETING”. The background image in these memes is a screenshot from the movie *The Lord of the Rings* which shows Boromir's troubled face. In this scene the characters need to decide on the best course of walking into the deadly land of Mordor where Boromir says: “One does not simply walk into Mordor”. For meme viewers who know the film, the phrase along with the image not only evoke the scene metonymically but also functions as a ‘prefix’ for any description of a proposed course of action, as shown in the bottom line (BT), deemed to fail by the speaker. The textual component structure *One does not simply do X* has formal stability. The image and the TT remain constant whereas the BT projects the specific undertaking that will not succeed.

**Figure 2**

*One Does Not Simply memes*



a. Working from home without distraction



b. Setting up a zoom meeting



c. Crashing a zoom meeting

The semantic macro-structure (topic) in Figure 2a is the social practice of working at home during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in Figures 2b and 2c, it is the common practice of actively participating in virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *One does not simply* meme typically means ‘something bound to fail’. The BT line functions as a macro-semantic marker. It represents the semantic model- the situation the discourse is about (=new information). The underlying presuppositions (previously shared information at any given moment of text or talk) are that during the COVID-19 pandemic working from home is not without distractions and one encounters many difficulties and technological problems in either preparing for zoom meetings or disrupting a zoom meeting due to the precautions

usually taken by the meeting host.

Each of the memes has a multimodal construction where the image and the text interact in order to signify undertakings as being futile. In these memes the verbal part acquires a new meaning when it interacts with the image of a popular and well-known semantic framework. The pictures about the famous movie character here serves as a frame; a set of ideas that can be elicited by presenting one related unit within this set of ideas (Lou 2017). Additional knowledge about the character, the actor and the particular movie helps the conceptualizer to interpret the meme. The conceptualizer perceives these memes as impossible situations. Each of the memes is allusive and intertextual since there is some reference to a certain famous character. The Mordor frame from *The Lord of the Rings* functions as a tool for categorizing a futile undertaking. Viewers are likely to create a blend between the dangers of Mordor and the phenomena featured by each of the meme makers: working at home without distractions, setting up or crashing a zoom meeting. If the blend is created, social practices featured in the above memes could be conceptualized as futile undertakings.

The Discourse Viewpoint in the first meme (Figure 2a) is that people who are working from home during the pandemic are often facing distractions. Among these are frequent interruptions by family members, friends or rather kids who might need help in their homeschooling, etc. The Discourse Viewpoint in the second meme (Figure 2b) and the third meme (Figure 2c) is that during the COVID-19 setting up zoom meetings successfully or trying to disrupt zoom meetings are sometimes accompanied with technological problems. The stance taken by the meme makers in each of these memes is a satirical one.

### 3.2 *I don't... But-memes*

The second category of the selected memes is the ones containing *but*-structures. Each of the memes below (Figures 3a, 3b and 3c) belongs to the *image macro* type of memes where there is TT, BT and a background image. There is one meme character that appears in the background. The background image is that of a well-known figure, Jonathan Smith. He is an American actor who was born in New York in 1938. He has an iconic image of being “The most interesting man in the world”: a gentleman who reflects on his past adventures which are humorous and outrageous. He played such a character in Dos Equis beer commercials from 2007 to 2016. In both Figures 3a and 3b the TT reads: “I DON’T ALWAYS WORK FROM HOME”. The BT reads: “BUT WHEN I DO, I DON’T ACTUALLY WORK” in Figure 3a and “BUT WHEN I DO, I ALWAYS WRITE WHF AWOSOME EMAILS” in Figure 3b. In Figure 3c the TT reads: “I DON’T ALWAYS CHIME ON IN CONFERENCE CALLS” and the BT reads: “BUT WHEN I DO, I ALWAYS FORGET I’M STILL ON MUTE”.

**Figure 3**

#### *I don't...But memes*



a. Working from home



b. Working from home



c. Being mute during conference calls



The semantic macro-structure (topic) in both the first meme (Figure 3a) and the second meme (Figure 3b) is the social practice of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meme maker has the presupposition that working from home is unproductive. In the first one the meme character expresses the view that while working from home, no actual work is done and in the second meme the meme character is sarcastically stating that in case they are working from home, time is spent on writing work-from-home emails which usually function as requests from employees to their bosses for working from home. The semantic macro-structure (topic) in the third meme (Figure 3c) is the social practice of virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on some kind of common behavior prevalent during virtual meetings. The underlying presupposition is that people attending virtual meetings are usually kept mute whether by themselves or by other attendees.

There is an interaction of verbal and visual elements. In each of the memes the verbal part is grammatically complete by itself; it consists of two main clauses. The first main clause is a general statement that expresses a routine situation by the meme character. The second clause starts with the linking word 'but' which expresses some contradiction followed by the subordinate clause "when I do". The auxiliary has the function of referring to the action expressed in the first main clause. This is then followed by a main clause expressing a more specific situation that happens during the action expressed in the first main clause; for example, not working at home, writing emails or keeping oneself mute during virtual meetings. In these memes the verbal part acquires a new meaning when it interacts with the image of a well-known and popular semantic framework. The background image evokes certain meanings. The image of the wonderful man in these memes metonymically evokes an image of a person who is reflecting on past

humorous adventures and who typically has an attitude of indifference. Similar to *One doesn't simply* memes, the verbal part acquires a new meaning when it interacts with the image of a well-known and popular semantic framework.

The Discourse Viewpoint in the first two memes (Figures 3a and 3b) is that people working from home are mostly unproductive. During the COVID-19 pandemic, working remotely might be challenging for some employees who might not be productive at home, feeling disconnected from the routine normal everyday working environment and failing at staying focused at work. The Discourse Viewpoint in the third meme (Figure 3c) is that people attending virtual meetings are sometimes inattentive; virtual meetings attendees frequently mute their videos and microphones. The behavior expressed in each of the memes is a representation of common behaviors by people when working from home or behaviors adopted by virtual meetings attendees: rarely giving remarks during conference calls and keeping themselves mute. The stance taken by the meme maker is a satirical one highlighting some of the social practices that were prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.3 *When-memes***

The third category of the selected memes is the *when-memes*. Each of the memes below (Figures 4a, 4b and 4c) belongs to the *image macro* type of memes. The first meme (Figure 4a) shows one meme character represented as someone who is looking troubled and upset and whose facial expressions reflect a feeling of irritation, disappointment and guilt. He is looking down and has a visible frown on his face. The TT reads: “WHEN YOU ACCIDENTALLY” and the BT reads: “SHARE THE WRONG SCREEN”.

Similarly, the second meme (Figure 4b) shows one meme character who is worriedly anticipating some unexpected event which is taking part in a Skype meeting. The TT reads: “WHEN YOU ARE WORKING FROM HOME and the BT says: “AND YOUR BOSS MESSAGES YOU ABOUT DOING SKYPE MEETING”. The third meme (Figure 4c) portrays a turtle as the meme character; the TT reads: “MY INTERNET SPEED DURING CORONAVIRUS” and the BT reads: “WHEN MY ENTIRE FAMILY IS AT HOME”.

#### Figure 4

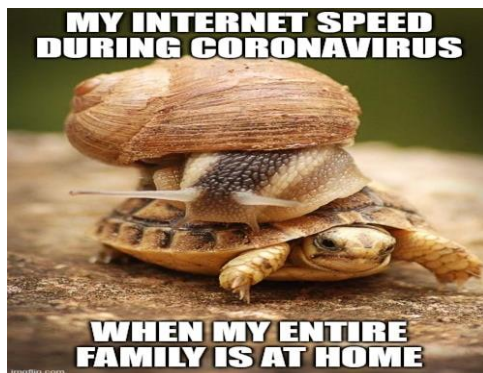
##### *When- memes*



a. Sharing the wrong screen



b. Boss asking for a Skype meeting while working at home



c. Slowness of the internet speed

The semantic macro-structure (topic) in the first meme (Figure 4a) is the common practice of virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic and the topic focus is handling slide sharing during such meetings. The presupposition held by the meme maker is that people sometimes feel disappointed upon sharing the wrong screen. The macro-structure (topic) in the second meme (Figure 4b) is the notion of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and the topic focus is the abrupt reaction upon knowing that someone's boss is about to hold a skype meeting while being at home. The underlying presupposition is that while working at home, an employee is usually dressed informally and his physical appearance is inappropriate for appearing in a skype meeting with their boss. Regarding the superstructures, there is a verbal part narrating the situation and a visual part depicting the participant's state upon being told that a skype meeting is due. It is clear from the attire and the facial expressions which show a state of surprise and lack of preparation or willingness to appear in a Skype meeting. The semantic macro-structure (topic) in the third meme (Figure 4c) is working from home and the topic focus is the slowness of the internet speed while working from home. The underlying presupposition is that the internet speed is very slow especially when the whole family is working at home. With regard to the superstructures, there is a verbal part which is a statement of one of the social problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: the slowness of the internet speed and the visual part which portrays a turtle.

There is a strong interaction between the image and the text in each of the three memes. In the first meme (Figure 4a), the text introduces the first part of the clause which is the subordinate clause; however, the main clause is missing; it is not stated verbally but visually through the facial expressions of the meme character. The image here is in focus as it functions as the main

clause of the linguistic part. Without the image, the meme will render no meaning. Similarly, there is a close interplay between the verbal and the image part of the second meme (Figure 4b). The message in the meme cannot be represented without one of these parts. The image is apportioned the role of providing the content of the main clause to the *when* clause. In the third mem (Figure 4c), meaning is presented powerfully through the employment of a multimodal metaphor: INTERNET SPEED IS LIKE A TURTLE where the internet is the target domain and the turtle is the source domain. The abstract notion is concretized. In a multimodal metaphor, there are image-text combinations using a source domain scene as a depiction with textual cues helping to guide the interpretation. The target domain elements are mapped onto the source domain elements in the depicted scene. The image is in focus; the meme is meaningless without reference to the image. Another noticeable feature in this meme as different from the preceding two memes is that the verbal part starts with the main clause, though incomplete, followed by the *when* clause functioning as a subordinate clause in the BT. In this way, the key message conveyed by the meme maker which is the internet slowness during the COVID-19 pandemic is foregrounded. In general, *when*-memes function as multimodal similes which are image-text combinations using a source domain scene as a depiction, with textual cues helping to guide the interpretation (*this is like that*) (Vandelanotte & Dancygier 2017). Thus, the constructional meaning is signaled despite the fact that some of the verbal elements are missing. The image interacts with the linguistic expressions for rendering the meaning inherent in the meme. In spite of the initial incongruity, the image prompts selective mapping between verbal and visual elements in order to produce a multimodal simile. Though the visual image might seem unrelated, it completes the *when* clause by prompting the conceptualizer to

identify the incongruity of the visual element and to select meaningful aspects of the image to arrive at the intended meaning. The image evokes certain frames; reconciling the visual and the verbal parts requires the conceptualizer to map the characteristics of the frame evoked by the image onto what is being said in the verbal part. Figure 4a's photograph conjures the frame of a zoom meeting attendee while the other two photographs conjure the frame of working at home during the pandemic.

The Discourse Viewpoint in the first meme (Figure 4a) is that people get upset upon sharing wrong screens during virtual meetings. The implied meaning is that some virtual meetings attendees lack familiarity with the relevant software. The Discourse Viewpoint in the second meme (Figure 4b) is that a person working at home is usually unprepared, whether physically or psychologically, to take part in a skype meeting. The Discourse Viewpoint in the third meme (Figure 4c) is that one of the main problems that family members are suffering from while working from home is the slowness of the internet meme. There is a reference here to the social context during the COVID-19 pandemic where the whole family is working from home to keep social distancing. In such circumstances, the internet speed is likely to be very slow. Similarly, this cluster of memes features some social practices that are prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic in a satirical way.

### ***3.4 Direct Speech Memes***

The fourth category of the selected memes is the *Direct Speech* memes containing quotations in the verbal part. The first meme (Figure 5a) includes a background image of a railroad worker moving a toy train at home and the second meme (Figure 5b) represents an archeologist trying to perform his job while being at home. The verbal part is a direct quotation by the government

urging people to work from home: “work from home” and another direct quotation in response which is actually missing; it is represented by the actions of both the railroad worker and the archeologist in the image. The third meme (Figure 5c) has two images in the background: the first image is of a woman who is terribly upset and the second image is of a cat sitting at a table with some food in front of her. The verbal part includes direct quotations said by the two main characters in the meme; the woman is shouting at the cat: “you were not at the meeting!” and the cat responding: “It should have been an email”.

**Figure 5**

***Direct speech memes***

government: work from home

Government : work from home

railroad workers:

Archaeologists :



a. Railroad workers working from home

b. Archeologists working from home

You were not  
at the meeting!

it should have  
been an email.



c. Being absent from a meeting

The semantic-macro-structure (topic) in the first and the second meme (Figures 5a and 5b) is working from home. The topic focus in the first meme (Figure 5a) is the work of the railroad worker. The underlying presupposition is that people are assigned work to be done remotely. The topic focus in the second meme (Figure 5b) is the work of the archeologist. Without the image, the memes render no meaning. The image is apportioned the role of a direct quote given by the railroad worker. In the third meme (Figure 5c) the semantic macro-structure (topic) is virtual meetings and the topic focus is that virtual meetings are often needless and can simply be substituted by emails. The underlying presupposition is that meetings might be emails can be substitutes for virtual meetings.

Each of the first two memes (Figures 5a and 5b) starts with an utterance in the form of a direct quote stated by the government: “work from home” which is in an imperative form giving instructions to people to work from home to achieve social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The response by the addressee which should have been expressed linguistically is missing. Alternatively, the viewer of the meme is led towards an image portraying the response of the addressee visually. The image in each of these memes represents the second quoted part in the meme. The quoted part by the government represents an unlikely-to-happen situation or an implausible opinion. This is reflected in the way people would perform their jobs at home: a railroad worker would move a toy train and an archeologist would dig the ground. There is a strong interaction between the linguistic part and the image. The image is in focus; without the image, the meme would render no meaning. The image is apportioned the role of a direct quote by the addressee. In the third example (Figure 5c), though the verbal part is complete through the two parts of the quote, the image supplements the meaning mainly through the



facial expressions and gestures of the meme characters. The cat in the meme is a visual representation of a human being. The image complements the verbal part. The cat is humanized via the conceptual metaphor ANIMAL IS HUMAN. The text added to the picture also relies on the ANIMAL IS HUMAN metaphor, since due to the tight closeness of the text and the picture, these memes are perceived as the linguistic messages formulated by the cat. Humor is created due to the incongruency between the real-life situation and the situation represented in the meme; we can obviously find the Real vs. imagined/ Possible vs. impossible type of incongruity, but the Natural vs. constructed and the Logical incongruity types also seem possible.

The Discourse Viewpoint in the first two memes (Figures 5a and 5b) is that though the government may give precautions for keeping people safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the announcements by the government are not feasible for people to achieve. The implied meaning in the first meme is that for some jobs, working from home is an impossibility. Though the government might encourage people to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are jobs that cannot be performed remotely. A case in point is the job of a railroad worker or an archeologist. The Discourse Viewpoint in the third meme (Figure 5c) is that emails might be substitutes for virtual meetings which might be time-consuming or rather needless. Similar to the previous examples, the stance taken by the meme makers is a satirical one highlighting some of the social practices that were prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***3.5 Opposition Memes***

The fifth category of the selected memes is *opposition* memes. The first meme (Figure 6a) has a background image split into two different images of

the same person: one in a formal working atmosphere and the other one in a home setting while cooking at the kitchen. The TT reads: “WORK FROM HOME” and is running across the two images and each of the sub-images has the BT including one word only: “EXPECTATIONS” and “REALITY”. These are juxtaposed expressing incongruity: expectations turning into nothing. Similarly, the other meme (Figure 6b) has a background image split into two sub-images of the same dog. The TT reads: “ZOOM MEETING” as one title running across the two sub-images and each of the sub-images are headed with “Audio only” and “With video”.

**Figure 6**

*Opposition memes*



a. Working from home: expectations versus reality      b. Zoom meeting: audio only versus with video

In the first meme (Figure 6a) the semantic macro-structure (topic) is working from home and the topic focus is the contrast between our expectations of our state while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and the actual real-life situations. Our expectation is that while working from home, we remain productive and meet the deadlines while attending to our personal affairs; however, in reality we are unproductive and our minds wander off and we lose track of time and it usually ends up with working for extra hours to compensate for the time that has been wasted. With

regard to the superstructures, the meme is divided into two parts: expectation is juxtaposed against real-life situations. The former part displays the image of a person in a formal attire carrying a laptop and is concentrating on what is being done. On the other hand, the person in the second image is standing in the kitchen wearing home clothes and the laptop is beside him in the kitchen but the person is not concentrating on his work. In the second meme (Figure 6b) the semantic macro-structure (topic) is zoom meetings and the topic focus is the difference in appearance in case the meeting is audio only or with video. The dog represents a zoom meeting attendee. The dog is humanized via the conceptual metaphor ANIMAL IS HUMAN. The text added to the picture also relies on the ANIMAL IS HUMAN metaphor, since due to the tight closeness of the text and the picture, these memes are perceived as the linguistic messages formulated by an animal. With regard to creating humor, we can obviously find the Real vs. imagined/ Possible vs. impossible type of incongruity. In each of these memes, the conceptualizer has two mental inputs. There is a new generic meaning that emerged as a result of the composition of the two inputs.

There is a strong interaction between the textual part and the image in each of the memes. The image is apportioned the role of visualizing the opposing situations in each of the memes; without the images, the memes will be meaningless. Regarding compositionality, though an explicitly stated linking word such as ‘but’ or ‘against’ is lacking in the textual part, the images help the meme viewer to deduce a sense of contradiction and to build up an image of antithesis between contradicting situations.

The Discourse Viewpoint in the first meme (Figure 6a) is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the common social practices is working from

home in order to keep social distancing where there is a mismatch between expectations and real-life situations. Similarly, as portrayed in the second meme (Figure 6b), during virtual meetings there is a great difference in the appearance of an attendee when the meeting is planned to be audio only or with video. The humorous effect results either from incongruity between different types of contradicting situations or incongruity between contradicting circumstances within the same situation.

#### 4. Discussion

**Research Question 1: In what ways is knowledge managed (presupposed, expressed and conveyed) by the makers of the selected memes during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Analyzing selected internet memes on social practices during the COVID-19 pandemic has elucidated some presuppositions by the meme makers. Some are related to “working from home” and others are related to “virtual meetings”. One of the presuppositions related to “working from home” is that working from home is not without distractions (figure 2a). Another presupposition is that working from home is unproductive (Figure 3a) and time is spent on writing work-from-home emails which usually function as requests from employees to their bosses for working from home (Figure 3b). Other underlying presuppositions are that while working at home, an employee is usually dressed informally and his physical appearance is inappropriate for appearing in a skype meeting with their boss (Figure 4b) and the internet speed is very slow especially when the whole family is working at home (Figure 4c). Another presupposition is that people are assigned work to be done remotely (Figures 5a and 5b). In addition, there is some contrast between our expectations of our state while working from home during the

COVID-19 pandemic and the actual real-life situations (Figure 6a).

In relation to “virtual meetings” one presupposition by the meme makers is that one encounters many difficulties and technological problems in either preparing for zoom meetings or disrupting a zoom meeting due to the precautions usually taken by the meeting host (Figures 2b and 2c). Another one is that participants always keep themselves mute (Figure 3c). A third presupposition is that people sometimes feel disappointed upon sharing the wrong screen (Figure 4a). Other underlying presuppositions are that virtual meetings are often endless and can simply be substituted by emails (Figure 5c) and there is some difference in appearance of the participants depending on whether the meeting is audio only or with video (Figure 6b).

Conducting a memetic discourse analysis of selected COVID-19 memes has shown that links between macrostructures and superstructures are established through reference to movie or famous characters, multimodal similes, quotations or the representation of opposing situations. Memes are also allusive and intertextual since they refer to other memes, other figures or characters, other political circumstances or social events and situations. Degree of details (facial expressions, attire, etc.), type of event or characterization are also manipulated. Different meme makers presuppose different ideologies and knowledge by the reader-viewers. In interpreting memes, not all background knowledge is relevant; metonymically-guided inferencing takes place in order to arrive at the intended meaning.

**Research Question 2: In what ways do the images and the linguistic expressions interact in projecting the intended meaning of the selected memes?**

Internet memes are texts which include both verbal and pictorial

elements. For this reason, they are usually viewed as multimodal constructions. Findings of the present research have shown that memes are complex creations; they are multimodal constructions where there is a strong interaction between verbal and non-verbal elements. The image sometimes complements the meaning conveyed by the meme and, at other times, the image is apportioned the role of completing the missing part of the verbal elements. However, the role of the image varies from one type of meme to the other. Images play different roles in combination with the linguistic expressions for rendering the overall meaning intended by the meme maker. The verbal part in a meme is sometimes complete and, therefore, the role of the image is secondary and is not in focus; the image might evoke certain meanings only. For example, in *One doesn't simple memes* (Figures 2a, 2b and 2c), the image and the text interact in order to signify undertakings as being futile. The verbal part acquires a new meaning when it interacts with the image of a popular and well-known semantic framework. The conceptualizer perceives these memes as impossible situations. The meme is allusive and intertextual since there is some reference to a certain famous character. Viewers are likely to create a blend between the dangers of Mordor and the phenomena featured by the meme makers: working at home without distractions, setting up or crashing a zoom meeting. When the blend is created, social practices featured in the memes are conceptualized as futile undertakings. Similarly, in *I don't...But* memes (Figures 3a, 3b and 3c), the verbal part acquires a new meaning when it interacts with the image of a well-known and popular semantic framework. In these memes the image metonymically evokes an image of a person reflecting on past humorous adventures with an attitude of indifference.

However, in other memes the image is in focus providing a missing

clause as in the case of *when*-memes or *Direct Speech* memes. In *when*-memes (Figures 4a, 4b and 4c), the image interacts with the linguistic expressions for rendering the meaning inherent in the meme. It prompts selective mapping between verbal and visual elements in order to produce a multimodal simile. The visual image completes the *when*-clause by prompting the conceptualizer to identify the incongruity of the visual element and to select meaningful aspects of the image to arrive at the intended meaning. The image evokes certain frames; reconciling the visual and the verbal parts requires the conceptualizer to map the characteristics of the frame evoked by the image onto what is being said in the verbal part. In *Direct Speech* memes (Figures 5a and 5b), the image represents the second quoted part in the meme. The quoted part by the government represents an unlikely-to-happen situation or an implausible opinion. There is a strong interaction between the linguistic part and the image. The image is in focus; without the image, the meme would render no meaning. The image is apportioned the role of a direct quote by the addressee. In *Opposition memes* (Figures 6a and 6b), there is a strong interaction between the textual part and the image. The image is apportioned the role of visualizing the opposing situations; without the image, the meme is meaningless. The image helps the viewer to deduce antithesis between contradicting situations.

**Research Question 3: What are the Discourse Viewpoints of the meme makers?**

This research foregrounds the role of internet memes not only as tools of political satire which is explored in a good number of previous studies but also as means of social communication. Internet memes perform the functions of entertainment and commentary on current events and situations. Some of

the Discourse Viewpoints related to “working from home” featured in the internet memes under study are: people working from home during the pandemic are often facing distractions such frequent interruptions by family members, friends or kids who might need help in their homeschooling, etc. (Figure 2a), people working from home are mostly unproductive, and working remotely might be challenging for some employees who might be feeling disconnected from the routine normal everyday working environment and failing at staying focused at work (Figures 3a and 3b). Other Discourse Viewpoints are: a person working at home is usually unprepared, whether physically or psychologically, to take part in a skype meeting (Figure 4b), one of the main problems that family members are suffering from while working from home is the slowness of the internet meme (Figure 4c), though the government might give precautions for keeping people safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the announcements by the government are not feasible for people to achieve, and there are jobs that cannot be performed remotely (Figures 5a and 5b). Another Discourse Viewpoint is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the common social practices is working from home in order to keep social distancing where there is a mismatch between expectations and real-life situations (Figure 6a).

Other Discourse Viewpoints related to “virtual meetings” are also satirically featured in internet memes, thus projecting perceptions and inner feelings towards such social practices. Examples of these are: during the COVID-19 setting up zoom meetings successfully or trying to disrupt zoom meetings are sometimes accompanied with technological problems (Figures 2b and 2c), people attending virtual meetings are sometimes inattentive, and virtual meetings attendees frequently mute their videos and microphones (figure 3c). Other Discourse Viewpoints are: people get upset upon sharing



wrong screens during virtual meetings (figure 4a), a person working at home is usually unprepared, whether physically or psychologically, to take part in a skype meeting (Figure 4b), emails might be substitutes for virtual meetings which might be time-consuming or rather needless (Figure 5c), and during virtual meetings there is a great difference in the appearance of an attendee when the meeting is planned to be audio only or with video (Figure 6b).

The stance taken by the meme makers in the selected memes under study is a satirical one. It results from incongruity; e.g., oppositions between expectations and reality, that plays a role in the generation of a humorous effect.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

This research aims at conducting an epistemic multimodal analysis of selected memes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The memetic discourse analysis involves exploring links between the overall semantic macro-structures and the superstructures. The research is grounded on the frameworks of two Cognitive Linguistics theories: Mental Model Theory and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Valendotte, 2017). The research is an attempt to participate in the growing plethora of studies on internet memes through targeting the cognitive properties of memes as a novel genre by exploring memes that comment on common social practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in a satirical way. Relying on Cognitive Linguistics theories helped the researcher in conducting a memetic discourse analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic memes: presuppositions by the meme makers, interrelationships between verbal and non-verbal elements and the Discourse Viewpoints of the meme makers were presented and explained. Conducting a discourse analysis of internet memes during the COVID-19 pandemic from a

cognitive perspective has been fruitful since it elucidated the relationship between discourse analysis of internet memes and a variety of well-established concepts in Cognitive Linguistics: mental model, multimodality, viewpoint, construction grammar, etc.

The phenomenal proliferation of internet memes as a novel means of communication merits more research. It is recommended that further research is conducted in order to analyze the multimodal discourse-view nature of memes that represent other social practices during the COVID-19 pandemic adopting epistemic multimodal approaches.

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