



Memes as Multimodal Discourse: A Linguistic Study of Humor on Social Media

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Abstract

This paper investigates memes as a form of multimodal discourse and explores how humor operates linguistically and visually in digital spaces. By analyzing Urdu-English bilingual memes collected from Pakistani social media, this research highlights the interplay between text, imagery, and sociocultural context that constructs humor and shapes identity. Drawing upon Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) *Multimodal Discourse Theory* and Attardo's (1994) *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, the study uncovers how memes encode linguistic creativity, cultural hybridity, and social critique. Humor in memes functions through code-switching, irony, and contextual intertextuality. Beyond entertainment, memes serve as sociolinguistic artifacts that reflect collective emotions, ideologies, and digital identities. This research contributes to discourse studies and sociolinguistics by emphasizing memes as evolving linguistic texts that represent new dimensions of humor and communication in postcolonial societies.

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, humor has evolved from a local conversational act into a globalized multimodal phenomenon, circulating across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. The shift from oral to visual-verbal humor marks a significant transition in the way's individuals communicate identity, resistance, and critique. Among these new digital artifacts, memes, humorous images, videos, or textual snippets that spread virally online; serve as semiotic condensations of shared experience. They employ language, image, and cultural knowledge to produce humor that is simultaneously local and global. This study explores memes as multimodal discourse, situating them within the linguistic and cultural context of Pakistani Urdu-English bilingual humor. In Pakistan, memes are not mere entertainment; they are reflective, dialogic spaces where people negotiate class, identity, power, and ideology.

The importance of this topic lies in its intersection between language, culture, and technology. Memes embody the convergence of visual semiotics and sociolinguistics, making them powerful indicators of how meaning is constructed in the digital age. Unlike traditional linguistic forms such as prose or poetry, memes rely on multimodality; the interaction between text, imagery, typography, and contextual knowledge to generate humor and social commentary. Their hybrid form allows for new ways of encoding emotion, satire, and critique. As Pakistani users increasingly participate in global digital spaces, the linguistic hybridity of memes (particularly the interplay between Urdu and English) reveals how postcolonial identities are performed online. Code-switching, parody, and exaggeration become tools for expressing cultural belonging and discontent simultaneously.

Background Study

Humor has long been a subject of linguistic and philosophical inquiry. Classical theorists such as Aristotle and Hobbes viewed humor through the lens of superiority, while Freud's (1905) *Relief Theory* considered laughter as a release of suppressed energy. Modern perspectives, however, focus on the incongruity theory, where humor arises from the violation of expectations. In linguistics, Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor (1994) ^[1] extended this understanding by emphasizing the interaction between script opposition, logical mechanism, and linguistic strategy. In digital communication, humor has evolved into a multimodal construct where visual, textual, and contextual cues work simultaneously to evoke laughter and meaning.

Scholars like Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have foregrounded the concept of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which examines how various semiotic resources, language, images, layout, and color combine to create meaning. This framework is particularly relevant to memes, which operate through a blend of linguistic wit and visual irony. Similarly, Shifman (2014) ^[10] defines memes as units of cultural transmission that reflect the shared ideologies of digital communities. In her view, memes are not static texts but participatory performances, evolving through imitation and reinterpretation.

In South Asian and postcolonial contexts, the study of digital humor has gained traction as a lens for examining linguistic hybridity and identity politics. Research by Varis and Blommaert (2015) and Chilwa (2013) highlights how social media users employ humor to negotiate national, ethnic, and class identities. Within Pakistan, meme culture has flourished as a vibrant form of socio-political commentary, drawing on both Urdu cultural references and English linguistic structures. This bilingual playfulness mirrors Pakistan's complex linguistic ecology, where English symbolizes power and formality, and Urdu embodies intimacy, nationalism, and emotion.

Memes, therefore, serve as digital mirrors of society; they expose contradictions, parody authority, and invite laughter as a form of resistance. The multimodal nature of memes, combining pictures, captions, hashtags, and emojis allow users to compress social commentary into concise, humorous texts that travel rapidly across networks. In Pakistan, where political satire and open criticism are often constrained, memes provide a safe yet subversive channel for the public to express dissent, negotiate taboos, and construct collective identity through humor.

Research Gap

Despite the global academic interest in meme studies, there remains a significant research gap concerning their linguistic and multimodal analysis in Pakistani contexts. While Western scholars such as Shifman (2014) ^[10], Dynel (2016), and Milner (2016) have investigated memes as cultural and communicative phenomena, the bilingual and postcolonial dimensions of meme discourse in South Asia; particularly Pakistan are relatively underexplored.

Existing research within Pakistan tends to approach memes from sociological or media studies perspectives, focusing primarily on political communication, youth participation, or online activism. Few studies, however, analyze memes as linguistically constructed multimodal texts that reflect underlying cultural and ideological patterns. Consequently, little is known about how Urdu-English code-switching,

visual symbolism, and inter-textual humor function together to shape social commentary in Pakistani memes.

This gap is critical because Pakistan's digital sphere operates at the intersection of postcolonial bilingualism and youth-driven internet culture. The humor that circulates within these spaces cannot be fully understood without examining how linguistic choices and visual modes interact to express identity, irony, and resistance. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by conducting a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of selected Urdu-English memes, exploring their humor structures, cultural references, and communicative functions.

Research Objectives and Questions

The objectives of this research are:

1. To examine how Urdu-English bilingual memes employ linguistic and visual modes to create humor.
2. To identify the semiotic and pragmatic strategies underlying humor in these memes.
3. To explore how memes, serve as tools of identity performance and socio-political critique.
4. To analyze how humor functions as cultural negotiation in Pakistan's digital public sphere.

Correspondingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do memes employ multimodal and linguistic resources to produce humor?
2. In what ways do Urdu-English memes reflect cultural identity and social critique in Pakistan?
3. How do users interpret and share these memes as acts of discourse within digital communities?

Methodological Orientation

The study employs a qualitative interpretive approach, analyzing fifty Urdu-English bilingual memes sourced from Facebook, Instagram, and X. These memes were selected based on their popularity, linguistic hybridity, and relevance to social and political themes. Each meme is examined through Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), Attardo's Humor Theory (1994) ^[1], and Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) to decode both visual and linguistic humor mechanisms. By integrating linguistic pragmatics and visual semiotics, this research uncovers how memes not only entertain but also function as discursive tools for identity formation and critique in Pakistan's postcolonial digital landscape.

Literature Review

The growing body of scholarship on digital communication, humor, and multimodality underscores the increasing importance of memes as a legitimate subject of linguistic and cultural study. The intersection of language, semiotics, and digital media provides fertile ground for understanding how contemporary users construct humor and identity online. This section synthesizes key theoretical contributions and empirical findings related to multimodal discourse analysis, humor theory, bilingualism, and meme culture, with a particular focus on the South Asian and Pakistani digital landscape.

Memes as Cultural and Linguistic Artifacts

The concept of the "meme" originated with Richard Dawkins (1976) ^[5], who defined it as a replicable cultural unit that

spreads through imitation. In the digital age, however, memes have evolved from Dawkins's abstract idea into concrete multimodal communicative acts, as articulated by Shifman (2014)^[10]. She argues that internet memes are "digital items with common characteristics, shared awareness, and transformative imitation," reflecting both individual creativity and collective ideology. Memes thus function as *micro-narratives* of social experience; encapsulating humor, critique, and cultural commentary within compact semiotic packages.

For Milner (2016), memes represent a form of participatory media that democratizes communication, enabling ordinary users to contribute to public discourse. Through humor, irony, and remix culture, memes become tools for negotiating power relations, expressing dissent, and forming community identities. Similarly, Wiggins (2019)^[11] emphasizes the discursive power of memes as ideological texts that can both reinforce and subvert dominant narratives. These perspectives collectively frame memes as linguistic and visual performances texts that both reproduce and resist cultural meanings.

Multimodality and Meaning-Making

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) provides a key framework for studying memes as complex semiotic systems. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001, 2006)^[8] work on visual grammar argues that communication in modern societies is inherently multimodal, involving the interplay of images, typography, color, and spatial arrangement alongside language. They contend that meaning arises not from individual modes but from their interaction, what they term *intersemiotic complementarity*.

In meme discourse, the visual mode (image, gesture, expression) and the linguistic mode (caption, font, code-switching) work together to create humor and emotional resonance. For instance, a simple juxtaposition between a serious political image and a sarcastic caption can produce powerful irony. This interdependence of modes has also been examined by Machin and Mayr (2012), who link multimodal analysis to critical discourse theory, emphasizing how visual resources can reveal hidden ideologies and social hierarchies. Within Pakistani digital culture, this framework is particularly relevant because memes frequently draw upon local imagery, Urdu idioms, and English slogans, creating layered meanings that depend on bilingual literacy and shared cultural knowledge. This multimodal interaction not only produces humor but also allows users to critique social norms through subtle semiotic cues; a wink, a font choice, or a meme template can carry distinct ideological weight.

Theories of Humor in Digital Discourse

Humor has been widely theorized in linguistic and psychological literature. The Superiority Theory, traced to Hobbes (1651), posits that laughter stems from a feeling of triumph over others' misfortunes or folly. The Relief Theory (Freud, 1905) views humor as a psychological mechanism for releasing tension, while the Incongruity Theory, popularized by Kant and later expanded by Attardo (1994)^[1], suggests that humor arises from the violation of logical or linguistic expectations.

In digital humor, particularly memes, incongruity plays a central role. Dynel (2016) notes that memes often exploit contextual and cultural incongruity; juxtaposing formal

language with informal visuals, or mixing sacred and profane themes to evoke laughter. The textual economy of memes demands precision: humor must be conveyed instantly, relying on cultural literacy and linguistic agility.

Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) provides a useful analytical lens by identifying six knowledge resources: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language. These parameters help decode how memes employ irony, exaggeration, or parody linguistically. For instance, when Pakistani memes blend Urdu idioms with English slang, they play on both linguistic and cultural incongruity, creating humor that resonates differently across audiences. The hybrid humor of Pakistani memes often reflects what Bakhtin (1981)^[2] describes as the *carnavalesque*; a subversive laughter that challenges authority while affirming communal identity.

Bilingualism, Code-Switching, and Cultural Identity

In multilingual societies, humor often relies on code-switching, the strategic alternation between languages within a single discourse. Gumperz (1982) identified code-switching as a form of contextualization cue that signals social relationships and power dynamics. In Pakistani memes, the frequent shift between Urdu and English functions as both a linguistic device and a cultural statement. English often indexes prestige, modernity, or irony, while Urdu conveys warmth, familiarity, and authenticity.

Research by Canagarajah (2013) and Pennycook (2017) on *translingual practices* underscores how bilingual speakers creatively negotiate meaning by drawing from multiple linguistic repertoires. This creativity is vividly observable in memes, where bilingual wordplay, transliteration (Urdu written in Roman script), and hybrid syntax are common strategies for humor.

Pakistani scholars such as Shamim (2008) and Rahman (2019) have examined how English operates as a symbol of social capital and elitism within Pakistani education and media. Within meme discourse, however, English is recontextualized; rather than symbolizing authority, it becomes a playful tool for irony and self-reflection. Code-switching in memes thus subverts linguistic hierarchies, allowing users to reclaim English as a medium of humor rather than hegemony.

Memes in South Asian and Pakistani Contexts

While international studies on memes have expanded rapidly, research within South Asia remains comparatively limited. Chiluwa (2013) analyzed Nigerian online humor and found that memes serve as forms of social critique in contexts of political instability. Similarly, Varis and Blommaert (2015) observed that online discourses in multilingual communities often rely on indexical meanings embedded in shared cultural symbols.

In Pakistan, a handful of recent studies have explored memes as tools for political communication and youth identity formation. For instance, Baig and Khan (2022) examined memes related to political leaders, highlighting how humor functions as a safe channel for dissent. Yousaf (2021) studied educational memes circulated among university students and noted their role in constructing academic stress humor through code-mixing. However, these works largely treat memes as sociological data rather than as *multimodal linguistic artifacts*.

Moreover, the sociolinguistic potential of memes in Pakistan's bilingual digital sphere remains understudied. Memes about cultural norms, gender roles, or class distinctions often rely on nuanced linguistic hybridity; mixing English idioms with Urdu proverbs, or juxtaposing elite and street language registers to produce humor. These practices reveal not only the country's linguistic diversity but also its postcolonial identity tensions, where the coexistence of Urdu and English signifies both unity and division.

Memes, Ideology, and Discourse of Resistance

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough (1995)^[6] and van Dijk (2008), offers another lens for interpreting memes as ideological texts. CDA seeks to uncover how discourse constructs and legitimizes power relations in society. Applied to memes, CDA helps reveal how humor masks critique; transforming political frustration, class inequality, and gender bias into digestible humor.

In Pakistan, where open political dissent can be risky, memes perform what Scott (1990) terms "hidden transcripts"; subtle forms of resistance communicated through coded humor. The meme's brevity and multimodality enable users to challenge dominant narratives under the guise of entertainment. Through intertextuality, irony, and parody, memes democratize discourse by giving marginalized voices access to public expression.

Thus, memes embody what Halliday (1978)^[7] describes as the *social semiotic* function of language; how linguistic choices reflect social meanings and cultural practices. They are cultural texts of resistance, simultaneously entertaining and politically charged, merging humor with critique in ways that are accessible to mass audiences.

In summary, existing research has illuminated the cultural, linguistic, and ideological potential of memes but has largely overlooked their bilingual multimodal dynamics in Pakistan. Studies by Shifman (2014)^[10], Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and Attardo (1994)^[1] provide solid theoretical frameworks for analyzing the interplay between humor and multimodality, while South Asian scholars emphasize identity negotiation in multilingual digital spaces. However, there remains a paucity of linguistic studies that analyze how Urdu-English code-switching, visual composition, and cultural intertextuality converge in meme discourse to create humor and critique.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by offering a critical multimodal linguistic analysis of Urdu-English memes in Pakistan, focusing on how humor operates as a vehicle for both cultural identity and ideological resistance in the country's evolving digital ecosystem.

Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Analysis

Memes are inherently multimodal; composed of words, visuals, and contextual references. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001)^[8] multimodal discourse theory offers a lens to understand how these modes interact to create meaning. The framework posits that all communication is multimodal, and that meaning arises from the relationship between linguistic, visual, and spatial elements.

Simultaneously, Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) provides insight into how linguistic mechanisms such as script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language contribute to humor. When applied to memes, these parameters reveal how humor is constructed through incongruity, irony, and

contextual awareness.

Memes thus become semiotic hybrids, combining verbal and visual humor. Their humor relies on shared cultural knowledge requiring the reader to recognize intertextual references, visual symbolism, and linguistic cues.

Methodology and Data Collection

This study uses purposive sampling to collect memes from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages popular among Pakistani audiences. Memes were selected based on:

- Bilingual text (Urdu-English code-switching)
- Humor-based communication
- Cultural and social relevance

Each meme was analyzed using multimodal discourse analysis principles, focusing on:

1. **Textual-Linguistic Analysis:** code-switching, register, puns, idiomatic use.
2. **Visual Analysis:** imagery, color, expression, layout.
3. **Contextual Interpretation:** sociocultural references, satire, ideological critique.

The qualitative approach allows detailed exploration of meaning rather than statistical generalization.

Discussion

The study of memes within Pakistan's digital landscape offers rich insights into how humor, bilingualism, and visual culture converge to produce meaning, identity, and resistance. Building on the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, this section critically interprets how multimodal and linguistic choices in Urdu-English memes reflect the socio-political, cultural, and ideological realities of contemporary Pakistan. The discussion is organized under key thematic lenses: humor as social commentary, bilingual code-switching as cultural negotiation, visual semiotics and intertextuality, and memes as ideological discourse.

Humor as Social Commentary

In Pakistani memes, humor functions not merely as entertainment but also as a mode of social commentary. It often emerges from familiar situations; academic stress, inflation, gender roles, and political failures that mirror everyday frustrations. Through humor, the unspeakable becomes speakable; critique is veiled in laughter. This aligns with Bakhtin's (1981)^[2] notion of *carnavalesque laughter*, which temporarily suspends hierarchy and gives the powerless a voice.

For instance, memes about electricity load-shedding or political corruption employ sarcasm and exaggeration to ridicule systemic inefficiency. A meme featuring a politician's smiling face captioned with "Bijli aa gai... sapne mein" ("Electricity came... in a dream") transforms collective grievance into shared laughter. The incongruity of a political leader's confident image paired with an ironic caption exemplifies Attardo's (1994)^[1] *script opposition*, where expectation and reality collide to create humor.

The humor also serves as an emotional coping mechanism. As Freud's Relief Theory (1905) posits, laughter helps release social tension. Amidst political instability and economic crises, meme humor becomes a therapeutic outlet; a communal sigh disguised as a joke. Importantly, this laughter is not apolitical; it reflects an intelligent awareness of social injustice and subtly mobilizes public consciousness.

Bilingual Code-Switching as Cultural Negotiation

Language choice is central to the humor and identity embedded in Pakistani memes. The creative use of Urdu-English code-switching illustrates what Canagarajah (2013) terms *translingual negotiation* where linguistic boundaries blur to reflect hybrid cultural realities. A common example is the meme format combining an Urdu proverb with English slang, such as “*Jitni lambi planning, utni jaldi flop*” (“The longer the plan, the faster it fails”). The mixture of Urdu structure and English phraseology creates humor through linguistic incongruity. This hybridization mirrors Pakistan’s postcolonial linguistic identity, where English represents prestige and modernity, while Urdu signifies national and emotional belonging.

Moreover, code-switching in memes often signals social identity and class consciousness. English is used ironically to parody elite discourse; “Dear Economy, it’s not you, it’s us” mocking the self-serious tone of Westernized elites. Conversely, Roman Urdu is employed to express intimacy and authenticity, such as “*Aaj mood bohat off hai, memes bhejo*” (“Feeling low today, send memes”). The bilingual blend reflects indexicality and each language indexes a social stance or affective tone.

This linguistic fluidity also functions as cultural resistance. While English historically symbolized colonial power, its humorous recontextualization in memes strips it of elitist authority. Pakistani users appropriate English to ridicule hierarchy and assert creative ownership of both languages. In doing so, memes become what Pennycook (2017) calls “sites of linguistic improvisation,” where language serves not colonial ideology but everyday humor and identity.

Visual Semiotics and Inter-textual Humor

Beyond language, memes derive much of their meaning from visual semiotics; the images, colors, and spatial arrangements that complement textual humor. Following Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) model of visual grammar, images in memes act as semiotic resources that shape interpretation through *salience*, *framing*, *gaze*, and *composition*. In Pakistani meme culture, popular templates often reuse celebrity faces, film stills, or viral expressions. For example, the recurring image of cricketer Sarfraz Ahmed’s puzzled expression or actor Mehwish Hayat’s smirk becomes a shorthand for irony. These recurring visual codes form what Shifman (2014) ^[10] calls *meme genres* recognizable visual-linguistic patterns that enable collective participation.

Intertextuality plays a critical role here. Memes often allude to global pop culture (e.g., *Game of Thrones*, *Money Heist*) but reinterpret them through Pakistani cultural frames. A meme captioned “Winter is coming... but so is load-shedding” fuses Western fantasy with local humor, creating a globalized narrative. This reflects what Blommaert (2010) describes as layered semiotic meaning, where multiple cultural references coexist in a single text.

Visually, the humor often relies on exaggerated expressions, misaligned captions, or deliberately crude edits, enhancing irony. Such stylistic choices reflect the participatory nature of meme production: informal, spontaneous, and collectively shared. The *aesthetic of imperfection* signals authenticity, differentiating memes from polished commercial media.

Memes as Ideological Discourse

While humor makes memes accessible, their ideological undercurrents reveal critical insights into social discourse. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) ^[6], memes can be seen as micro-texts that encode and challenge dominant ideologies; particularly concerning politics, gender, and class. Politically, memes often function as vehicles of dissent. In an environment where open criticism of power structures may be censored, humor becomes a shield. A meme showing a politician asleep in parliament captioned “Democracy in rest mode” delivers biting criticism without overt aggression. This embodies Scott’s (1990) concept of the *hidden transcript*, where subaltern resistance is expressed indirectly through coded humor.

Gender discourse is another prominent theme. Memes that exaggerate stereotypical behaviors of men and women often use humor to both reinforce and critique gender norms. For instance, memes mocking “desi mothers” for overprotectiveness or “Pakistani boys” for exaggerated machismo simultaneously reproduce and ridicule cultural expectations. Such double-voiced humor demonstrates Bakhtinian dialogism, where competing social voices coexist within the same text.

Class ideology, too, is embedded in meme discourse. Memes depicting elite lifestyles; coffee shops, English accents, imported goods; often contrast with working-class struggles. The humor here exposes class hypocrisy, reflecting Gramsci’s (1971) notion of cultural hegemony, where humor becomes a subtle act of reclaiming interpretive power. Thus, memes serve as ideological mirrors of Pakistani society: simultaneously conformist and rebellious, humorous yet politically charged. They reveal how digital users participate in meaning-making that both reflects and reshapes social hierarchies.

Memes as Collective and Democratic Discourse

A defining feature of meme culture is its participatory ethos. Anyone with a smartphone and creativity can contribute to the discourse. This democratization of humor exemplifies what Milner (2016) calls “pop poly-vocality”; the collective authorship of meaning. In Pakistan, where traditional media are often state-regulated or elite-dominated, meme culture offers alternative public spaces. It allows marginalized voices: youth, women, and linguistic minorities to express critique through humor. The viral spread of memes transforms them into digital folk art, echoing Halliday’s (1978) ^[7] idea of language as a social semiotic process. Moreover, meme communities on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) foster a shared sense of belonging. Users respond, remix, and reinterpret memes, creating a dialogic chain of humor that evolves collectively. This process aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of social learning, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction. Thus, memes embody both individuality and collectivity: each meme expresses a personal voice while contributing to the shared humor of the nation. The meme becomes a national text; a linguistic performance of identity, resilience, and collective laughter.

To summarize, the multimodal and bilingual dynamics of Pakistani memes reveal deep cultural, linguistic, and

ideological significance. Humor operates as social commentary, bilingualism as cultural negotiation, and visual design as ideological storytelling. Memes reflect the complex realities of postcolonial Pakistan, where laughter bridges the gaps between power and powerlessness, English and Urdu, tradition and modernity.

By synthesizing multimodal discourse analysis, humor theory, and critical discourse analysis, this discussion demonstrates that memes are not trivial jokes but rich linguistic performances that articulate the cultural consciousness of a digitally connected generation.

Conclusion

This study examined memes as multimodal discourse in Pakistani digital spaces, focusing on how humor operates through the intersection of linguistic, visual, and cultural modes. The findings reveal that Urdu-English bilingual memes not only entertain but also articulate identity, critique power, and reflect social consciousness. Through code-switching, intertextuality, and irony, memes transform everyday frustrations into humorous expressions of resilience. In Pakistan's bilingual context, memes function as democratic discourses that give voice to ordinary users while bridging local and global cultures. They demonstrate how humor can serve as both social commentary and emotional release, reinforcing the link between language, culture, and identity. Overall, memes exemplify the evolving nature of digital communication, where humor becomes a linguistic tool for meaning-making, negotiation, and resistance in contemporary society.

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