Revue de Traduction et Langues Volume 23 Numéro 02/2024
Journal of Translation Languages **مجلة الترجمة واللغات**
ISSN (Print): 1112-3974 **EISSN (Online): 2600-6235**
DOI: https://doi.org/10.52919/translang.v23i2.991

Humor in The Age of The Internet: The Case of Transmedial Humor

Salvatore Attardo
Texas A&M University – Commerce — United States
salvatore.attardo@tamuc.edu

To cite this paper:
Attardo, S. (2024). Humor in The Age of The Internet: The Case of Transmedial Humor. *Traduction Et Langues, 23(2)*, 22-33.

Received: 07/06/2024; **Accepted**: 07/07/2024; **Published:** 30/07/2024

Corresponding author : Salvatore Attardo

Keywords

Transmedia; Humor; Intersemiotic Tanslation; Internet; Memes

Abstract

The paper discusses the changes in humor that have occurred since the advent of the internet, in the past quarter of a century. The cognitive mechanisms that produce humor have not changed. However, since 2000, roughly when the Internet 2.0 (social web) is said to have started, there have been some minor changes at the level of slang, and especially the introduction of emojis, emoticons, and emotes. At the discursive level, the introduction of large group conversations (polylogues) is a major difference. Internet humor tends to be short. Probably the most significant innovation of humor since 2000 is the introduction of memes ("image macros" i.e., images plus text) and meme cycles (i.e., groups of memes that are thematically or formally related). Another interesting phenomenon is the blurring of the distinction between online satirical texts and fake media, to the point that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between parodies, actual news stories, and constructed stories (fake news). This has contributed in part to the widespread use of humor as a cover to spread white suprematist or neonazi propaganda. Another significant change is the advent of the participatory culture of social media, where the users (the audience of traditional media) become prod-users (i.e., they produce the media themselves), taking advantage of the affordances of the media. Yet another change is the blending of mirth and embarrassment, two emotions that were considered incompatible until "cringe humor" became popular in internet humor. In particular, the paper focuses on transmedial humor. Humor is found to be a transmedial constant, however the inter semiotic translation process required to transfer the text from one modality to another is found to affect in small but not indifferent ways the humor itself.

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155

Parole chiave

Transmedia ; Umorismo ; Traduzione intersemiotica ; Internet; Memes

Resumen

Questo articolo discute i cambiamenti dall'avvento della rete (internet), a partire dal 2000. I meccanismi cognitivi dell'umorismo non sono cambiati, ma ci sono stati alcuni cambiamenti nello slang, e l'introduzione di emoji, emotes, ed emoticons. Al livello de discorso, si nota l'avvento di conversazioni tra gruppi larghi. I testi comici tendono alla brevità. La maggiore novità è stata l'avvento dei memes ("image macros") che consistono di immagini spesso con testo sovrapposto e dei cicli di meme, cioè gruppi di meme connessi tematicamente o formalmente. Altro fenomeno interessante è la perdita di distinzioni tra le notizie fasulle (fake news) e la satira, al punto che a volte è difficile distinguere tra di loro. Questo ha contribuito parzialmente all'uso di materiale comico da parte di gruppi neonazisti e di estremisti della destra per celare e diffondere la loro propaganda. Un altro cambiamento è l'avvento della cultura participatoria su internet (social media) in cui i consumatori di media ne diventano produttori, utilizzando appieno le "affordance" dei media. Un altro cambiamento ancora è la commistione dell'allegria e dell'imbarazzo, due emozioni che erano considerate incompatibili, prima dell'avvento del "cringe humor." L'articolo riconcentra particolarmente sulla transmedialità. Il comico è una constante transmediale, tuttavia la traduzione intersemiotica necessaria a trasferire il testo da un medium a un altro influenza in maniera minore ma non indifferente il comico stesso.

There is no question that humor has changed since the advent of the internet and online communication. Entire new genres (e.g., the meme, the very short video) have been introduced. The question however is whether these changes are superficial, mere updates of themes and imagery, or whether they are profound and substantively novel forms of humor have emerged. In Attardo (2023), I asked precisely this question and answered it withe the only truly accurate answer that most interesting questions require: "it depends." Certainly we are not witnessing a completely novel form of humor, without precedent. The "old" theories of humor (incongruity, aggression, play) will not need to be rewritten. We still process incongruities in the same way, at the neurological level. Likewise, we still process the meaning of texts in the same way: incrementally adding to a mental representation and projecting ahead (anticipating) where the current flow of information is going. Human nature has not changed. It may well be that in another generation we will find that the ubiquitous presence of social media and smart phones will have an impact on our collective neurology, but for the time being, we're (relatively speaking) OK. However, this is not to say that there have been no changes at all. On the contrary.

Before we embark on a review of these changes, let's clarify that by "advent of the internet" and "online communication" we mean roughly speaking the period after 2000. As usual we mean humor in the broadest sense, as an umbrella term, encompassing all "texts" (likewise broadly conceptualized to include images, music, sculpture etc.) that are

produced with the intention of generating the experience of mirth (or exhilaration) and/or the perception of mirth relative to a text regardless of the intention of the producer of the text.

So, what are the changes in humor in the age of the internet? On a linguistics level, the changes are minimal: we get a few slang words and much jargon, but emojis/emotes/emoticons affect the linguistic landscape only marginally; see McCulloch (2019) for a broader overview. On the discursive level, the advent of polylogues (Bou-Franch & Blitvich, 2014; Herring, 2007; Marcoccia, 2004) has codified how large group conversations are held. Before the internet, large group conversations did not exist, of course. At the level of texts, the old Shakespearian adage that brevity is the soul of wit could be upheld as the motto of the era. This is particularly clear in the age of Vines, Reels, and other short video forms that last mere seconds. This tendency toward short texts, understood in a broad multimodal sense, encompassing video, audio, etc., can also be seen in what is arguably the most characteristic mode of expression in contemporary humor, the (internet) meme. It should be noted that the term "meme" is used in two senses: 1) as an "image macro" containing visuals and text; and 2) a cultural unit of knowledge. The second meaning is the original sense introduced by Dawkins (1976). The first meaning, now much more widely used, is derived from it. A further important detail is that most researchers use the term "memes" to refer to what is more precisely a meme cycle i.e., an original meme, called the founder meme (Shifman, 2014) or anchor meme (Attardo, 2023) and all its variants.

On a different level, the most significant change is the advent of of the participatory culture of social media, where the users (the audience of traditional media) become prod-users (i.e., they produce the media themselves; Bruns, 2008). The consequences of this change are momentous. With the advent of "produsage" a steady stream of short, low-quality memes (including short videos, images, text, etc.) are produced and uploaded by any producer who happens to have an idea of a variant of a given meme (or in some isolated cases, a novel idea). These crowdsourced products are then filtered by simple selection, in which the better quality products or the more topically relevant are reposted and further distributed and the low quality ones are simply ignored. Those that somehow catch the zeitgeist "go viral" and a significant number of people are exposed to them. We will return to these dynamics.

Before we do so, however, we should point out a few other significant changes. First and foremost, the blurring between online satirical texts and fake media has reached the point that it is often difficult to distinguish between humorous satirical posts and "serious" posts (be they disinformation or actual news). This may seem like an outlandish claim, but see the discussion in Attardo (2023, chapter 10). Related to this blurring of the distinction between parody and reality is a much more worrisome phenomenon: the deliberate use of humor to mask and facilitate recruiting for extreme right wing positions, such as openly Nazi, white suprematist groups and movements, such as the Daily Stormer, shows such as Murdoch, Murdoch, web sites such as 4chan, cartoon characters such as

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155

Pepe the Frog, and joke-religion such as Kekistan, and more. It is impossible to go into any of the details, but see Attardo, 2023; Sienkiewicz and Marx, 2022 and references therein.

Another significant, possibly epochal, change is the blurring between mirth and embarrassment, two emotions that were considered incompatible until "cringe humor" started gaining popularity in the last two decades, which have been called the "age of cringe" (Schwanebeck, 2021). Cringe humor is the experience of vicarious embarrassment while witnessing an ostensively humorous episode: "When watching a TV series or stand-up comedy capitalizing on cringe humor, we often experience this immediate affective and physiological response [= embarrassment] in our own bodies. Importantly, we experience this discomfort not because of our own mishaps, but vicariously due to the misbehavior of the protagonist (i.e., the target)" (Mayer et al. 2021, p. 3)

Finally, it is worth noting that the affordances of the technology also come into play, determining what is easy to do (and hence gets done frequently) and what is harder to do (and hence is done rarely). For example, Lessig (2008, p. 83) states that, "If in 1968 you wanted to capture the latest Walter Cronkite news program and remix it with the Beatles, and then share it with your 10,000 best friends, what blocked you was not the law. What blocked you was that the productions costs alone would have been in the tens of thousands of dollars." Today, remixing os mashing up two songs is child's play, literally. The 6-second length of vines (the ancestor of today's reels, i.e., short videos) determined what you could and could not do in a short video. Character development is impossible, pratfalls are easy. The availability of always-on, high-quality video recording equipment in the pocket of any bystanders affords Karen videos (entitled white women complaining, originally).

Of course, the affordances of different medias are necessarily different, at least in part. In what follows, we will consider a phenomenon that also is typical of the "age of the internet": transmediality (Wolf, 2011; Jenkins, 2003; 2014; Freeman & Rampazzo Gambarato, 2019). The concept of transmediality (transmedia) requires some explication. In its simplest, most basic from it refers to any narrative or story that can be presented in a variety of media, for example, as a linguistic narrative, as a film, or as a comic book. As Jenkins (20190 puts it "narratives and fictional worlds, not just characters, (…) extend (…) across media platforms." (p. xxvii Furthermore, the same characters may be used in video games, web pages, cosplay, fan fiction, figurines, and much more. Successful trans media endeavors become "franchises" (e.g., the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Disney/Pixar movies, Star Trek, etc.). Significantly, fan-produced stories, memes, costumes, etc. are a part of the transmedial "universe" around a work. For example, Jenkins et al. discuss humorous advertising campaigns (2013, pp. 204-207) which

Transmedial constants are aspects of a work that remain unchanged across media:

medial conditions shape the literary content to a considerable degree and therefore merit attention — even where literature shares features with other media. Examples of such transmedial features, in which medial conditions are a particularly important shaping

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155

force, include aesthetic illusion (…), narrativity (…), descriptivity (…), and self- or meta-referentiality (…). All of these individual phenomena can, of course, be studied from a monomedial perspective, but they gain relevance when studied from a comparative media point of view. This even produces benefits for the literary scholar since looking at one's own medium not only from the inside but also from the outside can reveal new aspects. (Wolf, 2011, p. 4)

Because humor is a transmedial constant (Martínez Sierra, 2023; Zabalbeascoa & Attardo, 2023), the differences that we observe must be due to the different affordances of the relative media.

Of course the passage from one medium (film, for example) to another (a meme, for example) is a case of inter semiotic translation (Jakobson, 1960/1987; Attardo, 2020, p. 344). The facility with which certain texts pass from one medium to another may be labeled "semiotic fluidity." Some texts are very fluid (for example a narrative) ad others much less (for example, a painting). This is not to say that a story cannot be transmediated into a painting (see for example, Brueghel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus) but merely that it is hard to transmediate the Mona Lisa into a story; but see Kalogridis, 2007). In many, possibly most, cases the direction of the transmediation goes from the big studio production to fan-produced memes or fan fiction. However, for the sake of completeness, we should note that the opposite is also possible. In the case of the 2006 film Snakes on a Plane, featuring Samuel L. Jackson the line "Enough is enough: I've had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane" was reportedly suggested by a fan during production and was incorporated in the script.

In what follows I will present a case study of the memeization of a scene from the film We are the Millers, a successful 2013 comedy, which won two MTV Movie Awards. The plot revolves around four strangers pretending to be a family in order to smuggle marijuana from Mexico in the US.

In particular, I will analyze a scene of the movie that has been translated into a meme. In the scene, three characters, played by Jennifer Aniston (Rose), Emma Roberts (Casey), and Will Poulter (Kenny) find out how much money David (Jason Sudekis) is making from the drug deal and how little they are getting paid.

The caption in the four images of the meme reproduces the dialogue of the movie closely, but not exactly (see Figure 1):

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155

Figure 1. Anchor meme

Figure 2. Composite of alternative expressions by Sudeikis during the scene

The first observation is that the four still images are (obviously enough) a reductive selection from many other potential stills that could have been chosen. See for example, figure 2.

This is not irrelevant. In the movie, David is embarrassed and tongue tied and thus is also ridiculed for his lack of solidarity with his fellow travelers/smugglers. This aspect is completely elided in the meme. Likewise, Kenny is in a wheelchair, after suffering an allergic reaction to a bee sting, and David treats him in an extremely callous manner, because he is in a hurry to leave, eventually making him fall out of the wheelchair. This is clearly humorous (exaggeration) but is also left out of the meme entirely. While this is true, it may also be considered a little unfair comparison: after all the meme consists of

one still image. It's already a stretch, accomplished by the division in four quadrants, to convey a 4-way dialogue, let alone the context of this conversation.

As we mentioned above, the text itself is not a faithful transcription of the movie dialogue (aside from the prosodic elements that are necessarily lost in the translation to writing). For example, Rose's line does not in fact contain a contraction. Rose says "You are making five hundred thousand dollars and you were only going to pay me thirty?" Casey's response in the meme includes "you're getting" which does not appear in the meme but the meme has an extra "only" which does not appear in the movie dialogue. Kenny's admittedly very faint "wait" is also omitted from his line. The full transcription follows:

David: Listen, I can explain.
Rose: You are making $500,000 and you were only going to pay me 30?
Casey: You're getting 30 grand? I'm getting a thousand!
Kenny: Wait, you guys are getting paid?
The video clip of the scene can be see here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=684NkDeSJis

One interpretation of these discrepancies between the text of the meme and the text of the movie script is simply that the author of the meme was sloppy and/or was quoting from memory. However, it is also possible to interpret the differences as a streamlining of the dialogue to optimize it for the meme format. In particular the changes to Casey's line with the addition of the "only" may be compensating for the loss of the prosodic emotional markers (the character is understandably upset).

At this point, if we have done a good job of showing the differences between the two texts, the reader should be questioning whether the meme and the film clip are in fact in any meaningful sense the same joke. This can be ascertained using the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo & Raskin, 1991), which famously contains a metric of similarity between jokes. The method is quite simple: we compare the Knowledge Resources of the two texts and, depending on where the differences are located, we can determine the degree of distance between the texts. Attardo & Raskin (1991) claim that the Knowledge Resources (KR) (which can be thought of as parameters of variation) are organized hierarchically, as follows:

Script Opposition (SO)
Logical Mechanism (LM)
Situation (SI)
Target (TA)
Narrative Strategy (NS)
Language (LA)

The similarity gradient maps on the vertical axis of the list: texts that differ in the lower KRs are more similar, whereas texts that differ in the higher KRs are more different. In the following paragraph, we will explore all six knowledge resources, in the order of the hierarchy. I have used the full names of the knowledge resources, capitalized, for ease of reading.

The SO is clearly the same in both texts: money vs. no money. This requires a little elementary abstraction since 500,000, 30,000 and 1,000 are all different sums of money and of course not getting paid is equal to no money. At a very abstract level, the opposition is between good vs. bad. It should be fairly clear that no money is bad, whereas any money is good. The Logical Mechanism is a little more complex to identify, but luckily I analyzed this joke in Attardo (2024) using a specific Logical Mechanisms I introduced in 2022, scalarity. In a nutshell, the organization of semantic materials along a scalar axis provides a (partial, playful) motivation (i.e., resolution of the incongruity). The only difference between the Galaxy Brain meme examples in analyzed in 2022 and the We're the Millers memes is the direction of the scale: growing vs. diminishing. So, the Logical Mechanism is the same in the movie and in the meme. Likewise, the Situation is the same in both texts: drug smuggling.

The Target can be identified with all four characters in the meme: David is obviously mocked for being selfish and exploitative; Rose and Casey, if for no other reason, at least for agreeing to a very bad deal, especially in Casey's case. Finally, Kenny is mocked for having agreed to the worst deal of the group and thus for being very naive. It may be debatable whether the Target extends to all four characters or just to David. Regardless, it is clear that there are no differences in this respect between the film and the meme. The Narrative Strategy is fairly obviously the same in both texts as well, since it consists of dialogue.

The naive objection that dialogue is not a narrative is handled in Attardo, 2020). One may substitute the term "textual organization" with no ill side-effects and implicitly eliminating the objection that dialogue is not a narrative. While that's strictly true, it does not follow that dialogue cannot convey a narrative. The Language of the movie and the meme match reasonably closely, except that of course the prosody of the dialogue in the movie is largely elided in the written rendition. In conclusion, this contrastive analysis

leads us to the conclusion that by the GTVH metric the video clip and the joke are very similar and one could reasonably argue that they are the same joke.

Be that as it may, this example shows very well how the humor of the situation is a transmedial constant, which resists inter semiotic translation. However, this is true if we focus on the single joke selected in the meme. This means abandoning the other aspects of the hyperdetermination of the humor in the movie. An aspect of humor that is easily forgotten is that many instances of humor are in fact hyperdetermrined, i.e., they include more than one source of humor. This aspect is often overlooked because, naturally enough, researchers focus on the simpler cases which are easier to analyze and display their features in a more pedagogically conducive manner. Raskin's doctor wife joke (Raskin, 1985, p.117-127; see Attardo, 2020, p. 17, on the status of this joke as "exemplar" i.e., a "worked out" example used both by professionals and learners to figure out how to do a given task) is hardly a good joke. However it is a simple joke that contains only one script opposition, hence its value for clarity.

We need to be clear about what the claim being presented here consists of. It is obvious that different media have different affordances. A figurine of Tintin is a 3D object that can be manipulated. A cartoon is an image printed in ink on paper or displayed on a monitor by an arrangement of pixels. Therefore, no two media will share all affordances. The question is rather what is "lost in translation" when going from one medium to another. The answer that emerges from this discussion is, again, it depends. It depends on the direction of translation, on the nature of the texts involved, on the degree of hyperdetermination of the humor, on the skills of the translator, and on the context of the intermedial translation itself.

References

[1] Attardo, S. (2020). The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction. Oxford University Press.
[2] Attardo, S. (2022). A new logical mechanism: Scalarity as resolution. Paper presented at the Humor Research Conference, April 1-2, 2022. https:// inside. tamuc.edu/ academics/colleges/humanitiesSocialSciencesArts/departments/literatureLanguages/ newsandevents/nethrc/history/12th-nethrc/default.aspx
[3] Attardo, S. (2023). *Humor 2.0: How the internet changed humor*. Anthem Press.
[4] - Attardo, S. (2024). From marijuana to grammar. *Babel*, *46*, 28-33.
[5] Bou-Franch, P., & Blitvich, P. G. C. (2014). Conflict management in massive polylogues: A case study from YouTube. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *73*, 19-36.
[6] Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. Lang.
[7] Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press.
[8] Freeman, M., & Rampazzo Gambarato, R. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies*. Routledge.

[9] Herring, S. C. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. Language@Internet, 4(1), 1-37. https://www.languageatinternet. org/ articles/2007/herring/
[10] Jakobson, R. (1960). Linguistics and poetics. In T. A. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language* (pp. 350-377). MIT Press.
[11] Jakobson, R. (1987). *Language in literature*. Belknap-Harvard.
[12] Jenkins, H. (2003). Transmedia storytelling. *Technology Review*. http://www. technologyreview.com/printer_friendly_article.aspx?id=13052
[13] Jenkins, H. (2014). Transmedia storytelling and entertainment: An annotated syllabus. In A. McKee, C. Collis, & B. Hamley (Eds.), *Entertainment industries* (pp. 145-160). Routledge.
[14] Jenkins, H. (2019). Foreword. In M. Freeman & R. Rampazzo Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. xxvi-xxx). Routledge.
[15] Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York University Press.
[16] Kalogridis, J. (2007). *I, Mona Lisa*. St. Martin's Press.
[17] Lessig, L. (2008). *Remix: Making art and commerce thrive in the hybrid economy*. Penguin.
[18] Marcoccia, M. (2004). On-line polylogues: Conversation structure and participation framework in internet newsgroups. *Journal of Pragmatics, 36*(1), 115-145.
[19] Martínez Sierra, J. J. M. (2023). From the page to the screen: Superlópez: Fun superheroes and transmedia. In L. Kostopoulou & V. Misiou (Eds.), *Transmedial perspectives on humour and translation* (pp. 69-88). Routledge.
[20] Mayer, A. V., Paulus, F. M., & Krach, S. (2021). A psychological perspective on vicarious embarrassment and shame in the context of cringe humor. *Humanities, 10*(110), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010010
[21] McCulloch, G. (2019). *Because the internet: Understanding the new rules of language*. Riverhead/Penguin.
[22] Murray, J. H. (2012). Transcending transmedia: Emerging storytelling structures for the emerging convergence platforms. In *Proceedings of the 10th European Conference on Interactive TV and Video* (pp. 1-6).
[23] Schwanebeck, W. (2021). Introduction to painful laughter: Media and politics in the age of cringe. *Humanities, 10*(4), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040020
[24] Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press.
[25] Sienkiewicz, M., & Marx, N. (2022). *That's not funny: How the right makes comedy work for them*. University of California Press.
[26] Wolf, W. (2011). (Inter)mediality and the study of literature. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, 13*(3), 1-9.
[27] Zabalbeascoa, P., & Attardo, S. (2023). Humour translation theories and strategies. In L. Kostopoulou & V. Misiou (Eds.), *Transmedial perspectives on humour and translation* (pp. 13-32). Routledge.

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155

Acknowledgements
The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of the editorial team and two anonymous referees.

Author Biodata
Salvatore Attardo, PhD (Purdue, 1991), is professor of Linguistics at Texas A&M University-Commerce. His books include Linguistic Theories of Humor, (DeGruyter, 1994), Humorous Texts, (DeGruyter, 2001), and The Linguistics of Humor, an introduction (Oxford UP; 2020). He edited HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research (2002-2011), the Encyclopedia of Humor Studies (Sage, 2014) and the Handbook of Language and Humor (Routledge, 2017). Among his recent books are Pragmatics and its applications to TESOL and SLA, (Wiley, 2021), Eye Tracking in Linguistics (Bloomsbury, 2023), both co-authored with Lucy Pickering, and Humor 2.0: How the Internet changed Humor (Anthem, 2023).

Declaration of conflicting interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.

Available online online at https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Articles/155