

The Visual Rhetoric and Meaning Shift of Memes

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Keywords: Memes; Visual rhetoric; Meaning shift

Abstract: Meme has evolved from characters to figurative icons and then to images and videos. Nowadays it has become an indispensable means of communication in people's life and a pop culture phenomenon in the age of social media. This paper will analyze the visual presentation and meaning shift of memes from the perspective of visual rhetoric, and it reaches the conclusion that the meaning of the memes presents shift in symbolic, entertaining and emotional expression.

Media research scholar Doris Graber pointed out: "The abstract meaning transferring through text symbols that we once praised has begun to give way to the reality and feelings built upon image communication."^[1] In recent years, image-based expressions have gone viral in the form of memes on social media platforms, and have become a prominent feature of online pop culture. In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries unprecedentedly chose the face with tears of joys emoji as its word of the year, indicating that meme has become a popular expression in countries around the world. On July 18, 2017, the Ministry of Education and the State Commission of Chinese Language and Culture released The report of Language Situation in China (2017) in Beijing. Meme was selected into the top ten new words of Chinese media in 2016. The research papers on memes in China has been increasing greatly, which has become a hot topic in communication researches for the scholars.

1. Visual rhetorical representation of memes

Meanings must be expressed by symbols, and the purpose of symbols is to express meanings.^[2] Meme in nature is a symbol, the purpose of which is also to express meanings. In the process of development, the pictographic meaning of the meme has gradually faded, while the symbolic meaning has become increasingly prominent. As visual rhetoric as a theory is an exotic product, domestic researches on it is still in the stage of exploration, therefore there is no complete and clear definition of it. From the perspective of communication studies, it is generally considered that "visual rhetoric is a kind of human communication behavior aimed at achieving the best visual effects by using language, image and audio-visual comprehensive symbols as the medium."^[3]

Mememes are visual communication phenomena which are mainly image-based and integrated with text and other symbols. Common visual rhetoric methods of images are: metaphor, exaggeration, parallelism, borrowing, pun, empathy, symbol, contrast, irony, mapping, etc.. In the process of constructing the communication meaning of memes, the authors will mainly analyze two most

frequently used rhetoric, namely exaggeration and irony of memes.

1.1. Visual exaggeration in memes

Visual exaggeration "is to construct things in a direction away from reality through visual image" ^[4]. It is a rhetorical method that breaks the norms and daily standards, and can emphasize the viewpoints and attitudes that communicators want to convey. It has the magic of turning the prosaic into magical, and enhancing the visual impact while breaking people's conventional cognitive patterns of things. Such as the popular real-person image memes, these real-person images can be selected because of their exaggerated facial expressions or gestures, which are beyond the conventional scale in daily life, with strong visual impact and entertainment. There are also the series of meme called Rage Comic, which add exaggerated visual effects through graphic interactions. Representative images of these series are Gold Curator and Wang Nima. In the picture presentation, the face or body is exaggerated, such as ugly facial features, green hat, male and female grafting, distorted body shape, etc.. Such pictures are not beautiful, but they can attract attention and attract eyeballs, together with interactive text, such as "Bitchy", "Calm down" and other rhetoric, making the exaggerated visual presentation of the meme images greatly enhanced, resulting in humorous and playful rhetorical effects.

1.2. Visual irony in the memes

The rhetorical definition of irony is that it is not only not a direct expression of a symbolic expression, but the opposite meaning. Such a text has two opposite meanings: literal meaning/actual meaning. The two are opposite and coexisting, and one of which is the main meaning, another meaning is to set off. ^[5]The meaning of the meme symbols is also complicated by the direct meaning communication. The recipients are not satisfied with memes that only have simple meaning expression. They start to use meme images which have deeper and concealed meaning and need deep interpretation. Therefore, the irony becomes an important visual rhetoric expressed by the current memes. The irony in the memes mainly achieves the reverse communication effect through the irony and self-deprecating expression. Many graphic expressions have obvious irony effects. For example, the meme text "make a living by a handsome face" combined with the image of begging in the picture, has achieved an effect of irony by this kind of self-deprecating expression; The text "My dad is Li Gang" conveys the reverse meaning through the expression of irony. It is a mockery of the phenomenon of "hostile to the officials" in the society. Usually when we interpret the memes, we not only need to see the surface meaning of the image, but we also need to interpret the meaning of the connotative meaning of the image.

2. Meaning shift of memes

Through the above analysis of the visual rhetoric, we understand that the transmission of memes has a complex meaning presentation, and the meme is not simply a means of auxiliary communication, the meaning of its usage has changed significantly. Symbolic, entertaining, and emotional meanings are becoming more and more prominent.

2.1. Symbolism of memes

The pictographic meaning of the memes are gradually fading, and the symbolic meaning are gradually increasing. To interpret the true meaning of memes at this stage, we should not rely on the common-sense visual experience, but on a cultural experience - not to look at its "pictogram"

expression, but to see what kind of culture it "symbolizes".^[6]From the pictographic to the symbolic meaning, the expression of the meme symbol is more complicated and diverse. The interpretation of the meme symbol also requires the recipient to have a similar cultural background or life experience. For example, there is a clear difference between the memes used by middle-aged and elderly people and the memes used by young people. In addition, parents will often face decoding errors in the communication process between them and their children.

2.2. Entertainment of memes

Meme makes the states such as "ugly" and "mean" which are conventionally inappropriate to reveal and show, become the way to demonstrate individuality and ego. On the one hand, this is the deconstruction of traditional aesthetic cognition; on the other hand, it is also the breakthrough and struggle of the grassroots for the right of self-expression. Memes allow people to be courageous and willing to show the facet that is neither recognised by authority nor part of a orthodox culture. Under the guise of entertainment, memes act as a "weapon" to constantly contend with serious political and social issues. For example, in 2016, in a BBS forum called "Emperor's Expedition" netizens from mainland China and Taiwan exchanged memes on cross-strait social networks, using an entertaining way to dispel the political and cultural barriers between the two sides, showing a clear sense of meaning shift towards entertainment.

2.3. Emotionality of memes

Emoji no longer only has the meaning of original hieroglyphs. It has no direct correspondence with the user's own facial expression. It only represents a kind of emotion, attitude and feeling and it is a kind of emotional symbol.^[7]People use memes instead of communicating to express real facial expression features, but to become an emotional expression. For example, in the case of South China Sea arbitration in 2016, the meme images of the South China Sea Arbitration Case was popular on the Internet, expressing resistance to the Philippine government, "Let your ugly mango jerky stay at home", "Those who offend China, are all pigs", "You fucking are a Filipino," and so on. These text and images combined memes all show that memes have become an important way for people to vent their emotions. In daily life communication, memes have also become an important way of emotional communication.

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