Personal pronouns and the construction of memetic meaning

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Internet memes are a genre which relies on standard language use, while adjusting forms and meanings to specific memetic roles. For example, as demonstrated in Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017), memes representing predictive constructions applied to specific meme-characters omit the subject NPs (e.g. *Gets mad at you / tells you why* over a picture of 'Good Girl Gina'). The reason why the grammar of memes changes some standard rules of syntax and reference in English is that the discourse of memes, while resembling direct speech, does not set up standard deictic grounds. We suggest that relying on the concept of viewpoint networks (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016) leads to a satisfactory explanation of the forms used in memes.

The paper analyses several types of memes, to uncover the nature of memetic discourse spaces and the meaning of the pronouns used. Here, we show three types of memes: *when*-memes (Fig 1), *what if I told you* memes (Fig 2), and *me/also me* memes (Fig 3). These memes typically profile three discourse participants: the meme-maker (MM) and meme-viewer (MV), who represent the context in which memes are made and received, and, on the other hand, the meme-character (MC), an identity represented in the meme, via an image, or relevant discourse, or both.

Memes typically mimic Direct Discourse (DD), suggesting that the pronominal choices are made based on conversations. However, these conversations are not conducted against any specific Deictic Ground; rather, they are 'demonstrations' (Clark & Gerrig 1990) of attitudes and viewpoints. In Fig 1, a similative meme (Lou 2017, 2021), uses the 2nd person pronouns (*your, you*) to attribute the mood represented by the monkey's dispirited posture to MVs. The MM's once experienced mood is thus generalized over any MV who found themselves unable to use their phone.

MM does not typically refer to themselves as "I", as the form is effectively reserved for MCs, who are construed as addressing another MC or any MV. In Fig 2 what is said by a character in *The Matrix* applies to a contemporary social media platform (Instagram), outside of the movie's narrative. References to MM reporting their own experience typically use *me* as a reporting pronoun (as a condensed reporting frame similar to that used in interview styles), and then use *I* as DD (see Fig 3). Overall, the *me/also me* pattern is clearly that of demonstration/depiction (Clark 2016), with one space constructed linguistically, and the other via an image. Like most memes, this type also references a pattern of behaviour, not a specific event.

Overall, our analysis shows how memes manipulate Discourse Spaces, Deictic Grounds and pronoun use in ways that profile generalized behavioral patterns. All the identities referred to are used as illustrations of the patterns and inhabit behavioural spaces or generic discourse spaces. The transfer of attitudes between MMs' experiential spaces and those of MVs' experiences constructs viewpoint networks, while de-emphasizing specific identities. We argue that the memetic use of pronouns serves the needs of network construction and the expression of attitudes, not of reference.

Fig. 1: 'When' meme

Fig. 2: 'What if I told you' meme

Fig. 3: 'Me / Also me' meme

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