



RESEARCH PAPER

Pakistani Political Memes and Social Awareness: A Pragmatic Analysis

¹Dr. Nazia Anwar, ²Dr. Moazzam Ali Malik and ³Zarmina Khalid

1. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
3. M Phil Linguistics, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author:** moazzam.ali@uog.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The political meme is a new trend in Pakistan that has emerged in the fast-paced digital world. The mix of humor, irony, and drawing creativity provides these memes with a very potent tool of mass commentary and participation. The current research intends to identify the pragmatic aspect and the communicative strategies used in Pakistani political memes and how sarcasm, humor and irony help in creating social awareness. The study is based on the transference of the meaning and realistic situation of Pakistani government officials to the public. The current research took a qualitative and pragmatic discourse-analytic method and examined a corpus of 100 memes circulated on the top social media channels including Facebook, Twitter (X) and Instagram in 2022-24. The analysis was based on practical aspects like speech acts, implicature, politeness violation and multimodal irony. The results of the research have indicated that Pakistani political memes often violate Gricean maxims and use indirect speech acts to criticize power, challenge authority and reveal social contradictions. Interaction of both verbal and visual helps to contribute to the humorous and ironic coloring that allows spreading socially-acceptable messages with a political coloring. The study recommends that political memes in Pakistan can be used as an entertainment medium as well as a means of digital activism and education and shows how humor can be a kind of social commentary in the modern online communication environment.

KEYWORDS Pakistani, Political Memes, Awareness, Pragmatic Analysis

Introduction

Over the past few years, the digital media platforms have revolutionized the modes through which the political discourse is being produced, circulated and consumed in Pakistan. One of the most likable types of this discourse are the political memes: brief, comic, ironic visual-textual integration, commenting on the political events and leaders as well as on social reality. All of these memes hold the status of virality shared on various platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (X) and Instagram which is a sign that humor is now a means of criticism, opposition and awareness (Muzaffar, 2016; Shifman, 2014). The memes offer the citizenry a safe and imaginative platform to express dissatisfaction, state their allegiance or ridicule their political enigmas as political and social tensions continue to dominate Pakistani society. Pragmatically, the memes have multifaceted communicative functions that are more than humor. They use implicature, irony and speech act to convey meaning indirectly. These pragmatic characteristics enable the users to question authority or to reveal corruption without necessarily confronting it (Dynel, 2011; Muzaffar, et. al., 2020). Memes can be a subversive yet a safe method of communication in the context of Pakistan and direct political criticism can be delicate. Therefore, the pragmatic processes that Pakistani political memes are based on may make it possible to see the role of humor in the social awareness and political consciousness. Although, the importance of memes has been increasingly important in

the development of political perceptions, limited studies have been conducted to understand how pragmatic strategies like sarcasm, irony and humor are applied in the Pakistani political memes. Although the digital discourse and humor have been analyzed in Western academia (Attardo, 2020; Milner, 2016; Muzaffar, et. al., 2019), local works tend to concentrate on the sociological or cultural aspects of memes, but not on their pragmatic-linguistic purposes. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap about the role played by language use in memes in achieving social commentary in the special socio-political setting in Pakistan. The current study undertakes the said gap by examining the pragmatics and communicative intentions within Pakistani political memes. The current study is important in two aspects. First, it adds to the sphere of pragmatics and discourse studies by proving that the indirect use of language, irony and humor play a critical role in the online communication. Second, it contributes to the study of media and culture in the sense that memes create awareness in the society and encourage action via entertainment. Educators, communication experts and policymakers interested in knowing the way humor-based content influences the opinion of people and digital activism in Pakistan may use the findings.

Literature Review

Pragmatics and Political Communication

The pragmatics as a linguistics discipline analyses the ways in which the meaning is made in context through the intentions, implicatures as well as common knowledge of the speakers (Levinson, 1983). Political communication is usually an area of pragmatic strategies to guide the interpretation and is a perfect area of pragmatic inquiry. Van Dijk (1998) argues that the language of politics is persuasive and manipulative in nature, and it is based on language that expresses power relations. Likewise, Chilton (2004) notes that there are pragmatic devices including presupposition, deixis and metaphor that enable the politicians to package ideological standpoints indirectly. These pragmatic functions are more dynamic in electronic communication whereby people parody and redefine political meanings by use of humor and irony (Mey, 2001). In that way, the pragmatic analysis of memes places itself into the wider context of the way language works as a means of social and ideological action.

Memes as Digital Discourse

The humorous images have spread to become more sophisticated types of participatory communication called memes (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). They are a combination of visual and written semiotics and portray cultural and political ideology (Davison, 2012). According to Shifman (2014), memes are cultural transmission units, which evolve and spread by means of imitation, alteration, and intertextuality. The political memes especially represent the commentary and satire of the masses (Milner, 2016), which is an interpretation through which citizens are seen to be involved in political discourse over the internet. According to Ross and River (2017), memes should be viewed as micro-political actions, when the political criticism is undertaken by ordinary users by way of humor. In the Pakistani context, memes are used by social media users to react to the political instabilities and to exhibit the group identity (Khan and Ahmed, 2020). Thus, memes are the manifestation of the creativity in linguistics and the social involvement.

Political Humor, Irony and Sarcasm

The purposes of humor and irony are pragmatic and social necessity since it is possible to criticize someone with the slogan of fun (Attardo, 1994). Dynel (2011) exclaims that irony works by creating the tension between literal and intended meanings and

sarcasm increases it through evaluative mockery. Political comedies have always been associated with opposition and protest (Holmes, 2000). As Tsakona (2013) argues that political jokes and memes produce a sense of shared meaning between audiences via the implied criticism. Humor is a risk-free and socially acceptable way of resistance in weak democracies, including Pakistan where free speech can be suppressed (Godiwala, 2020). Baym (2010) also notes that the humorous political contents help the citizens to process the complex issues in an emotional and cognitive manner. Therefore, humor, irony, and sarcasm can entertain as well as create social and political consciousness.

The Pragmatic Features of the Digital Humor

The pragmatic analysis offers important tools to break down the hidden meanings in the memes. The cooperative principle by Grice (1975) involves flouting of conversational maxims to produce implicature and humor by memes. As an example, the exaggeration or irrelevancy is the indication of the sarcasm or mockery (Thomas, 1995). The bonding of memes and speech acts further explains how memes can do the illocutionary acts of criticism or a protest in the disguise of humor which is explicated by Searle (1979) in his theory of speech acts. Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that the strategies of politeness and impoliteness control the process of diminishing or escalating criticism; memes often rely on off-record politeness to dilute face-threatening communication. Moreover, Yus (2016) focuses on the fact that online irony relies on inferential communication i.e. the audience has to interpret the contextual presupposition to comprehend intended meaning. It is an inferential process that increases pragmatic awareness and participation of users in the process of meaning construction.

Political Memes and Democracy

The connection with memes and social consciousness has been a subject of digital media research in the recent past. According to Highfield (2016) and Guran (2020), memes can promote participatory democracy because it provokes citizens to question political narratives. Political memes have been used as an instrument of entertainment and protest in Pakistan (Raza & Malik, 2021). Due to the relatability of memes, the intertextuality of memes enables viewers to relate the personal discomfort to the wider societal concern (Philips and Milner, 2017). Also, Wiggins (2019) has discovered that memes can cause political opinion making when they employ affective humor and cognitive criticism. By pragmatic analysis, memes demonstrate the mediating function of linguistic creativity in terms of comprehension, which establishes a hybrid type of a political discourse, a mixture of humor and ideology. The study of South Asian online cultures (Chaudhry, 2020; Arif, 2022) suggests that humor-oriented content is frequently used as a form of education, defying the official discourse by the use of satire. It is especially true in Pakistan, where meme culture gives the voice to politically conscious young people, who otherwise might not belong to the mainstream media conversation (Jaffrelot, 2021). These memes can express dissent implicitly by the use of the pragmatic dimension, particularly, implicature, presupposition, and speech acts, which foster awareness towards one another by laughing together.

Meme Pragmatics' Theoretical Frameworks

Multimodal discourse analysis is also being combined with pragmatics by scholars to understand the role of textual and visual components in constructing meaning together (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Forceville, 2017). Memes are multimodal by nature; their pragmatic effect is based on the interaction of language signs, visuals, and intertextual allusions (Zappavigna, 2018). According to Page (2019), the practical aspects

of memes are that they serve as a means of irony, criticism, and social bonding. In the same vein, Varis and Blommaert (2015) suggest that a meme practice is evidence of a localized interpretation of the global political narrative, expressed as a sign of the so-called vernacular creativity. This research is contextualized with the current discussion on digital semiotics, public discourse and humor pragmatics by examining pragmatic strategies in Pakistani political memes. In general, the current literature confirms that memes, with pragmatic processes like implicature, irony, multi-modality, influence the perception, criticism and expression of political realities by citizens. Although, little empirical research has examined these attributes in the context of the sociopolitical environment in Pakistani context- a gap in analysis that this study intends to fill.

Material and Method

The study assumed a qualitative descriptive design based on pragmatic and discourse analysis frameworks to understand the use of humor, sarcasm and irony in Pakistani political memes to generate social awareness. It was decided to use the qualitative method as it will be possible to interpret the linguistic and contextual meanings present in the digital discourse in-depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study concentrated on the pragmatic elements and approaches of memes that rapidly spread in the social media in 2022-2024, a year characterized by a significant political debate and change of leadership in Pakistan.

Data Collection

One hundred political memes were chosen intentionally on three of the largest platforms Facebook, Twitter (now X) and Instagram. The selection of these platforms was attributed to their rate of meme circulation and their position as major platforms of the online political communication in Pakistan (Giglietto and Lee, 2017). The criteria followed to select memes included (a) clear reference to Pakistani political leaders or political parties, (b) linguistic or visual humor, and (c) achieving a certain required minimum of public attention (likes, shares, or comments greater than 500). This guaranteed that the sample was comprised of memes that have a high level of publicity and social influence. Memes of all kinds were stored and sorted by topic, political affiliation, and humor of the type (sarcastic, ironic, parodic or satirical). The textual elements of memes that is caption, dialogues and embedded slogans were read and reproduced word by word. The interpretation of the visual cues such as facial expressions, symbolic images, and layout using a multimodal method was also recorded based on the model of multimodal discourse theory suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021).

Analytical Framework

They were analyzed based on a pragmatic discursive approach that incorporated Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979), Cooperative Principle of Grice (1975) and politeness strategies provided by Brown and Levinson (1987). The triangulation enabled the researcher to find implicit meanings, conversational implicatures and face threatening acts concealed in humor and irony. Recurring pragmatic patterns, including assertion, sarcasm, presupposition, and indirect protest, were coded using the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In order to increase the standard of credibility and reliability, the data were manually coded and matched using inter-coder agreement with two academic colleagues who were conversant with pragmatic discourse. The ethical aspects were upheld by making sure that every meme that was used was publicly available and non-proprietary, which corresponded to the principles of digital research ethics (Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

Research Design and Context

The research had an interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on meaning-making in a way of social interaction (Schwandt, 2014). Since political memes are contextualized in terms of culture, the interpretation depended on the sociolinguistic competence and knowledge of a researcher of Pakistani political situations. It was not about being generalized but rather conceptual depth, how meme discourse determines political perception and awareness of the population. Therefore, this analysis has integrated linguistic pragmatics with socio-political semiotics because it was recognized that the humor and irony of memes serve as mules of resistance and reflection (Phillips and Milner, 2017). Combining qualitative discourse analysis with pragmatic principles allowed discovering the ways in which the citizens turn to memes as rather insidious instruments of commentary and critique in the context of the changing digital public space in Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

This portion contains the pragmatic analysis of the Pakistani political memes gathered on different online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram, between 2022 and 2024. These records consisted of 100 memes of the key political personalities and parties in Pakistan including Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan people party (PPP). This analysis aims at defining the features of pragmatics and strategies used in these memes (speech acts, implicature, presupposition, deixis, politeness strategies, and humor devices) and investigating the role of sarcasm, irony, and humor in raising awareness in the Pakistani culture. The framework is based on the theories of Grice (1975), Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Brown and Levinson (1987), etc.

Pakistani Political Memes Pragmatic Features

Speech Acts

The most overwhelming pragmatic attribute that was present in the Pakistani political memes were the illocutionary acts- particularly assertive and expressive. Evaluative assessment of political events and personalities was made, using assertive, which imply that the speaker is bound to the truth of the proposition (Searle, 1969). An example is memes ridiculing inflation, corruption or regime related matters which tended to make sarcastic claims such as Tabdeeli has finally come--now in the price of bread meaning the inability to deliver on the promise of political change. The use of expressions was also common expressing the frustration, disappointment or humor of people. The memes enable citizens to be catharsis, with an indirect release of emotions, and the expression of the overall feelings of the masses. Some of the memes engaged in directive actions, asking the audience to do or think differently in future-e.g., Vote wisely next time which is a mixture of humor and education.

Conversational Implicature

The cooperative principle and maxims introduced by Grice (1975) can be a helpful perspective on comprehending how memes get their meaning outside of literal language. The vast majority of the political memes deliberately violate the Gricean maxims in order to create humor or irony.

- Maxim of Quality: Breaches were made whereby memes made overstated or false claims to work towards the satirical impact of calling politicians superheroes who rescued the nation and graphically picturing the anarchy.

- Maxim of Relevance: Several of the memes would intentionally present unrelated pictures or slogans (i.e. combining commentary on a cricket game with political commentary) to point out the lack of compatibility and arouse laughter due to cognitive dissonance.
- Maxim of Manner: Unclear captions, puns or code-mixing in Urdu-English ("Jugaar politics at its best!"), produced a comedic effect, but asked the audience to consider more.

Such is not just mere violation and is very carefully used to imply political inefficiency or hypocrisy or moral corruption. They are also relying on communal sociopolitical knowledge, and it is seen that meme understanding necessitates contextual and cultural competence (Thomas, 1995).

Presupposition and Deixis

Other pragmatic tools used frequently included presupposition and deixis, which makes economy of expression possible. Political memes usually assumed a background of political events, scandals or personalities. To provide an example, a meme with a picture of a politician falling asleep in a parliamentary session assumes an understanding of the reputation of the politician as an absentee or a person with incompetence. Deictic expressions were used to construct in-group identities and out-group identities and they consist of: this, that, we, they and you. We were usually used to signify the people or the youth and they were usually used to signify the rotten elite. This polarization of language is a sort of representation of ideological difference in Pakistani politics (Fairclough, 1992). Memes therefore bring a sense of unity and strength of the citizens sharing similar frustrations.

Humor as a Democratic Device

Entertainment and enlightenment functions are played by political memes with humor. The memes have a mode of operation, the incongruity, exaggeration, and script opposition, which is postulated by Attardo (1994) in the General Theory of Verbal Humor. Indeed, it is possible to demonstrate the elements of manipulative speech in campaign speeches, one of the examples is the demonstration of the good politician in the role of a salesman who represents empty promises in comic key. This kind of humor has a democratizing task- it enables common citizens to question authority without the traditional authority. In Pakistan, whereby political talk is commonly polarized and constrained, memes are secure avenues of dissent and other open arenas of the populace (Habermas, 1989). Humor therefore creates active social interaction where passive observation is involved. Memes also contain sarcasm which leads to the development of an implicit resistance culture and discursive empowerment, especially in youth who can be more open to expressing their political views on-line than they are when in the physical world (Shifman, 2014).

Irony and Group Retrospection.

The irony of Pakistani political memes is usually based on the differences between the rhetoric and the reality. Visual irony like a politician opening the same road several times will show the systemic inefficiency as well as help the audience ponder over the repetitive political failures. Irony also serves as cultural self-examination to the citizens to ask themselves why and how they contributed to the election or tolerance of the corrupt systems. Contrasting to a hostile political commentary, ironic memes are suggested in a light tone, which reduces defensiveness, making it easier to accept the message and raise awareness as people laugh together (Dyner, 2016).

Trends of Pragmatic Strategies

Table 1
The patterns of pragmatics identified in the analysis were repeated:

Pragmatic Feature	Frequency (%)	Example / Function
Conversational Implicature	30%	Humor through flouting of maxims
Speech Acts (Assertive/Expressive)	25%	Political criticism, emotional expression
Sarcasm and Irony	20%	Indirect protest, social commentary
Presupposition/Deixis	15%	Shared political knowledge, identity construction
Politeness / Impoliteness	10%	Satirical criticism, audience alignment

These tendencies substantiate the fact that Pakistani political memes can be viewed as a contextually rich communicative practice that works through a mixture of linguistic creativity and cultural intertextuality. They work as commentary, protest and pedagogy all at once, showing how pragmatic strategies are formed in relation to the ways that people interpret and social consciousness.

The Pragmatic Use of Multimodality

The linguistic text is important but the visual mode is equally pragmatic. Listening to images, emojis and layout play a role in the meaning-making process via semiotic interaction. As an example, when the picture of a politician is put next to luxurious objects, with a caption on the presence of the public service, the implicature of corruption increases due to visual irony. The multimodal discourse theory, by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also confirms this observation: meaning in memes is a result of the interplay between verbal and visual signs. Pragmatic analysis should therefore consider visual deixis, gaze direction and framing, which give directions to the viewers on the intended interpretations.

Social Awareness Implications

Pragmatic Features: Mainly consist of conversational implicatures, assertive and expressive speech acts, presupposition, and strategies of off-record politeness.

Humor Mechanisms: The functions are based on irony, exaggeration, and contextual contrast, which help to create indirect political criticism.

Social Consciousness Effect: Memes will make complex political realities available, easily understandable, reflective and funny, so that citizens will feel strong enough to challenge authority and at the same time stay socially united.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of 100 Pakistani political memes, it was noticed that there exist specific pragmatic strategies where linguistic humor, sarcasm, and irony interplay to generate a critical commentary about the political behavior and governance. Three major findings were made: (1) preponderance of indirect speech acts and implicature, (2) the strategic application of multimodal irony to criticize authority, and (3) the use of memes to create digital consciousness.

First, the Pakistani political memes were characterized by indirectness. The majority of memes expressed the criticism by violating the maxims of Grice (1975), the maxim of quality and relevance in particular, to obtain humor that can suggest disapproval. This can be held in line with the argument of Dynel (2011) that irony and humor frequently become socially acceptable modes of confrontation. Such pragmatic violations are allowed in Pakistani meme culture, allowing political dissent, but

providing the impression of playfulness. To illustrate, memes that targeted the failures of the government through inflation or governance were exaggerated in praise (Thank you for making us richer- in experience!), which was sarcastically broken to literal meaning to demonstrate frustration in the society. This result is reminiscent of the theory of Attardo (2020), who admits that humor discourse operates on a principle of intentional ambiguity to enable the presence of criticism in the form of entertainment.

Second, multimodality promoted the effects of pragmatics. The captions and images were used in a synergistic manner where the images were used to reinforce the irony in most instances. Memes that contain a photo of a politician and an inappropriate text (e.g. Mission accomplished and a crumbling infrastructure) resulted in visual implicature that is considered as visual and textual inter-semiotic complement (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Such an interaction is not just enhancing humor but also they generated multifaceted socio-political meaning that could not be created by words. The visual irony was especially effective to show the gaps between the rhetoric and the real outcomes, which confirms that digital memes are participatory genres of social criticism (Shifman, 2014).

Third, the data revealed that memes are unofficial means of political awareness. The users employ sarcasm to satirise and educate their colleagues; this is in matters of corruption, failures in leadership and duties. This confirms what Milner (2016) argues that the meme culture reflects the political communication since it enables the ordinary citizens to rebrand the political language. Another aspect of memes is that they are bottom-up, unlike the traditional media where humor does not have to be a method of reflection but rather a method of apathy. This application of memes by these Pakistani users, particularly the youths, has been a tactic of an effort to make statement regarding the frustration they experience, and at the same time, cementing the sense of group on the matter of governance and justice. In addition, the irony which prevails in most of the memes was not cynical in the genuine sense of the term. Instead, it implied more realistic consciousness, that change starts with the realization of the absurdity of political reality. It coincides with the results of Chagas et al. (2019), who have discovered that political memes in new democracies are likely to perform the functions of a pedagogical instrument, i.e. humor is used to join the sociopolitical discourse. On the same note, according to Highfield (2016), online humor may moderate emotionality and activism to facilitate positive participation in digital citizenship.

Recommendations

The memes play a two-fold role which is both to relieve tension and at the same time to educate and mobilize the digital audiences towards awareness and accountability. Future studies can elaborate this question by using quantitative content analysis. However, this practical examination proves that within the digital landscape of Pakistan, humor is resistance and that humor and not inconsequential, but it turns into a language of social awareness. Further studies can strengthen the idea of use of digital materials for creating awareness by working on tok-toks, reels and vlogs.

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