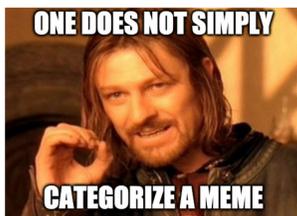


# “One does not simply categorize a meme”: A dual classification system for visual-textual internet memes

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## Introduction



As part of our ongoing study of disability discourse, we began researching Instagram memes countering “inspiration porn” (Young 2014) and other false societal discourses (Gee 2015) about disability. As we collected our corpus, we noticed patterns in the ways meme creators used multimodality and intertextuality

to subvert harmful master narratives. The original purpose of our research was to study how a marginalized community combats damaging narratives in online discourse. However, while existing literature on memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Yus 2018) offered some tools for analysis, they lacked a sufficiently flexible framework to describe the variation that we observed in visual-textual memes.

Memes change rapidly due to their use as a primarily digital discourse (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017). Any particular style of meme will be quickly overtaken by new creative varieties. Therefore, we propose a flexible, widely-applicable dual classification system that can be used to analyze memes across a variety of platforms, communities, and topics.

## Meme Composition

Meme composition describes the visual language of memes, and thus explains how meme creators combine and re-contextualize images and text to create new meanings. Different styles of meme composition describe memes by their structure, beyond previous studies’ limitation to the individual images or fonts they employ.



**Meme Composition: Character**  
Figures in the image are redefined using text, thereby attributing the figures actions/reactions to the textual object.

**Multimodal Quality: Label**



**Meme Composition: Comic**  
Consecutive images are combined to create a narrative that is dependent on movement through time or cause and effect. The images cannot be reordered.

**Multimodal Quality: Caption**



**Meme Composition: Description**  
Text is given alongside or overlaid on an image to contextualize what the image is meant to represent.

**Multimodal Quality: Caption**



**Meme Composition: Comparison**  
Two consecutive images featuring a facial expression or body language change that indicates one positive and one negative reaction to two opposing ideas or concepts.

**Multimodal Quality: Caption**



**Meme Composition: Conversation**  
At least two entities converse verbally or nonverbally, followed by an image that represents the response of the second speaker to the first.

**Multimodal Qualities: Caption & Utterance**



**Meme Composition: Sign**  
A character/figure interacts with an object that contains text, where the actions of the character informs interpretation of the text.

**Multimodal Quality: Utterance**



**Meme Composition: Subtitle**  
A screenshot from another piece of media (i.e. a movie) with edited subtitles to alter the speech (additive or subtractive) of the character in the screenshot.

**Multimodal Quality: Utterance**

## Method

We collected a corpus of 50 memes from the social media app Instagram from January 2019 to December 2020. We limited our dataset to English language memes posted on public accounts.

Data was required to be multimodal and intertextual, and—for the goals of our ongoing research—had to address a societal discourse about disability, rather than simply being a joke or a comment about life experiences.

## Definitions

Although the term **memes** can describe a variety of cultural artifacts, we limited our use of the term to a small-d discourse posted online or on social media that is both multimodal and intertextual.

- **Multimodality** in our study required both text and image to interact meaningfully with each other.
- **Intertextuality** in our study required the meme to draw on an identifiable prior text for understanding of the current text.

This study was specifically concerned with visual-textual memes, not with video memes or text-only memes.

## Multimodal Quality

Multimodal quality describes how the text interacts with the image in the meme. This is the manner by which the meme composition is created by the user. Based on our data, the system allows more than one multimodal quality for each meme.

Multimodal Qualities:

- Label:** Entities in an image are labeled with text to indicate alternative representational meanings.
- Caption:** Text recontextualizes the image as a whole by giving it a different referential meaning.
- Utterance:** Text represents the language attributed to a figure in the image.

## Findings

- **Meme composition** and **multimodal quality** are two separate but interrelated dimensions of a meme.
- The **dual classification system reflects linguistic choices** made by meme creators and explains creative flouting of expectations.
- Our work provides insight into new **methods of meaning-making** in digital spaces.
- This flexible system is designed to be **expandable to other data**, including other online communities of practice and alternate modalities.

## References

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