

# Semiotics of spreadability: A systematic approach to Internet memes and virality

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*The paper proposes a semiotic approach to Internet memes, a discursive domain that, although it represents a key and growing form of literacy, has so far been largely ignored by semiotics. Since the early 2000s, 'Internet meme' has referred to a wide range of culturally shared pieces of media circulating over the Internet, such as catchphrases, funny captioned pictures, and so-called 'viral' videos. Internet memes are 'spreadable'—they are effective, dismountable, customizable, and replicable. From a semiotic perspective, they are different kinds of texts that circulate thanks to a hypertextual dissemination; namely, through a process of transformation (samples, remixes) and imitation (remakes). Their syntax displays structures that mirror their creators' different operations of manipulation (bricolage) and that serve as a hook to users' agency, inviting them in turn to spread, modify or re-create the text. At the semantic level, despite the variety of themes and figures they carry, they all feature a striking element (punctum), usually a playful one (an incongruity, a 'mistake'), which serves as a hook to users' engagement.*

KEYWORDS Hypertexts; Internet memes; Semiotics; Spreadable media; Viral videos

## Introduction

Surprisingly, some key Internet-based textual practices, which are widespread and pervasive, have been almost completely ignored by semiotics. This is largely due to their relative novelty and to their complex and challenging features. The latter, in fact, pose the problem of a rigorous definition of the objects themselves as well as of the choice of a suitable way to collect and analyze them.

As Massimo Leone (2011) suggests, in order to dispel the risk of being nothing more than a 'micro-sociology' of the 'new technologies', a proper 'semiotics of the new media' should consider the Internet and social networks not so much as a 'mirror of society', but as an autonomous system with its own specificities (the modes of creation and diffusion of the contents they generate) existing in dialectical relation with 'offline society' (in a mutual exchange of forms and contents). Society does appropriate social networks—as a tool, an environment, a discursive dimension, and a proper linguistic system. Among these new, Internet-based linguistic systems, Internet memes are one of the most interesting and important.<sup>1</sup>

## Internet memes: An overview

### *The notion of 'meme'*

'Meme' (pron. /'mi:m/) is a neologism coined by the English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), aimed to identify the 'new replicators'—namely, non-biological, cultural replicators. The word 'meme' is an abbreviation, modeled upon the word 'gene', of 'mimeme', from the Ancient Greek *μίμημα* ('imitation, copy'; whence 'mimetic' and 'mimicry'). According to Dawkins, the meme is 'a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*', in other words, a 'cultural gene'; 'Examples of memes are tunes,

ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches' (2006: 192). Any unit of information that succeeds within a given social and cultural context, to become a model for textual production,<sup>2</sup> can be defined as a meme.

The idea that the 'atomic' elements of a given culture, understood as 'living structures', would propagate themselves from brain to brain (elsewhere Dawkins talks of the 'viruses of the mind', with particular reference to religion),<sup>3</sup> just like genes do from body to body, and that culture as a whole follows an evolutionary development (in the Darwinian sense, just as in biological processes), is fascinating. This idea has set off a great debate in the scientific community, gathering both enthusiastic agreement and radical criticism, and launching 'memetics', a whole new discipline set in the perspective of cultural evolutionism (cf. Hofstadter 1985, Blackmore 1999).

As Paul Bouissac (2007) suggests, Dawkins' original statements left unclear whether the notion of 'meme' should be meant metaphorically ('weak hypothesis') or ontologically ('strong hypothesis'). Namely, whether memes should be broadly considered as 'units of imitation (that is, whatever can be imitated and consequently can spread both vertically and horizontally to form cultural assemblages endowed with various degrees of inclusive fitness for the individuals and cultures that foster these particular memes)' or as:

autonomous agencies who replicate on their own in brains (in the form of algorithms or cellular automata who take over the resources of the brains they invade and manipulate these resources for the sake of their own reproduction through replication irrespectively of the well being of their hosts). (Bouissac 2007: 2)

Daniel C. Dennett (1995) insists that the ontological status of memes is still open to question and, according to Bouissac, the strong hypothesis 'has not been yet the object of a serious scientific inquiry' (2007: 3).

### *Memes and signs*

Some of the most radical criticisms of Dawkins' notion of 'meme' have come from biosemiotics, a branch of semiotics that studies the production and interpretation of signs in the biological realm. Terrence W. Deacon (1999, 2004), Kalevi Kull (2000), and Erkki Kilpinen (2008) maintain that the notion of 'meme' is heuristically useless, being nothing more than a 'weak double' of the notion of 'sign', emptied of its triadic nature ('sign or representamen', 'object', and 'interpretant', according to Charles S. Peirce), and capable only of being replicated. Consequently, memetics appears to be heuristically useless as well; furthermore, its epistemological assumptions seem to widen the gap between 'nature' and 'culture', whereas semiotics, and, in particular, biosemiotics and 'global semiotics' (cf. Sebeok 2001) seek to reconstitute this dichotomy. Following Yuri Lotman's theories, Kull (2000) highlights the translational nature of any process of information transmission, rather than that of copying or imitating (cf. also Latour 1986: 266).

Notwithstanding the above criticism the notion of 'meme' has been employed in semiotic studies (cf. Nöth 1995: 166, Volli 2003: 218-222) as a synonym of an 'efficacious and spreading idea, sign or text'; namely, it has been employed metaphorically, without endorsement of the holistic ideology of the memetic paradigm. Besides, Bouissac (1993, 1994, 2007) maintains that 'memes matter' within a semiotic perspective, since the eventual discovery of memes as ontological entities set in the brain might open the path to a new paradigm, 'evolutionary eosemiotics' (2001).

Our purpose here is to assign to memes a proper heuristic value within a sociosemiotic perspective (cf. Floch 1992, Landowski 1999, Marrone 2001), by considering them as a specific type of texts circulating throughout social discourse. To this aim, we will invoke the most important contemporary inflexion of the notion, namely 'Internet memes' (cf. Shifman 2013), to identify both their specific features and those they share with other web-related textual phenomena.

### *Memes and the Internet*

By the second half of the 1990s, researchers and scholars in the fields of cognitive and computational sciences (cf. Heylighen 1996, Best 1997, Marshall 1998) started to propose the idea of using memetics ‘as the basis for obtaining a better understanding of the Internet both in its operation and in the way it is used’ (Marshall 1998). The notion of ‘meme’ seemed ‘to explain what it is that circulates on the net’ (McKenzie 1996) or, at least, represented a ‘fitting metaphor for Internet culture, affording exact copies of digital artifacts, rapid person-to-person spread, and enormous storage capacity – a perfect storm of copy-fidelity, fecundity, and longevity’ (Marwick 2013).

Since the early 2000s, the use of the word ‘meme’ in relation to the Internet is no longer exclusive to insiders. *Wikipedia* registers the relation between Dawkins’ meme and the Internet for the first time in 2001 and, more extensively, in 2004<sup>4</sup> (cf. also Hodge 2000). ‘Internet meme’ has been established as an umbrella term to identify a wide range of texts circulating in the Internet (‘phenomena specific to the Internet’, according to *Wikipedia*), such as ‘popular themes, catchphrases, images, viral videos, jokes’<sup>5</sup> or, in other words, ‘culturally shared pieces of media’ (Constine 2009: 1).

Internet phenomena are memes according to folk taxonomy and in a metaphorical sense, as they are deliberately altered by human creativity; still, they present proper memetic features. Limor Shifman (2009, Shifman, Levy and Thelwall 2014) has studied Internet memes according to the principles of memetics, employing quantitative-statistical methods and proposing the idea of a proper ‘Web memetics’ (cf. also Coscia 2013, Quattrociochi, Caldarelli and Scala 2014). Dawkins himself has claimed that the Internet has ‘hijacked’ and substituted the original notion of ‘meme’ (cf. Solon 2013).

### *Early Internet memes*

An indicative list of famous early Internet memes (namely, Internet memes defined as such, already established as ‘classics’ between 2004 and 2006)<sup>6</sup> includes:

- *Dancing baby* (1996): An animated GIF of a disturbing 3D dancing baby;
- *Mr. T Ate My Balls* (1996): A website containing pictures of Mr. T – a character from the TV series *The A-Team* (1983-1987) – captioned with nonsensical phrases;
- *All your base are belong to us* (1998): A screenshot from the 1989 videogame *Zero Wing* displaying the sentence (a broken-English translation of the original Japanese one);
- *Emotion Eric* (1998): Pictures of a person imitating emoticons;
- *Hampster dance* (1998): A webpage completely filled with animated GIFs of dancing hamsters;
- *Yatta!* (2001): A comical song by the fictional Japanese boy band Green Leaves;
- *Star Wars kid* (2002): A video featuring a person imitating the *Star Wars* character Darth Maul (from the film *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, 1999);
- *Leeroy Jenkins* (2004): A video parody of the videogame *World of Warcraft*;
- *Numa Numa* (2004): A video featuring a person funnily lip-synching Haiducii’s cover version of the song *Dragostea din tei*;
- Pages from the satirical websites *The Best Page in the Universe* (1997) and *Real Ultimate Power* (2002) and the shock website *Goatse* (1999).

### *A brief chronology of Internet memes*

Internet memes preceded the Web<sup>7</sup>, but globally they exploded outside of their native ‘Internet geek’ womb with the so-called ‘Web 2.0’, coinciding with the boom of social networks like Facebook and video sharing platforms like YouTube (both launched in 2005).<sup>8</sup> More specifically, it is possible to talk of:

- **Proto-Internet memes** (1990s): At the dawn of the Internet as a social and cultural phenomenon, early Internet memes circulate via emails (e.g., chain-letters and virus hoaxes, such as the *Goodtimes* spread in 1994) and discussion groups on *Usenet* (wherein, in 1982, Scott E. Fahlman had created the emoticons, reported by some as the first example of an Internet meme; cf. Davison 2012).
- **Internet meme subculture** (late 1990s-2005): In a second phase, Internet memes circulate mostly via message boards, image boards, and personal blogs. The most important among the boards are by far *4chan*<sup>9</sup> (a true memeplex – a ‘factory of memes’ – created in 2003 by 15-year old American geek Christopher Pool aka moot) and *Reddit*<sup>10</sup> (created in 2005). *4chan* has set the standard for contemporary Internet memes.
- **Global Internet memes** (2005-): The third and latest is the ‘industrial’ and simultaneously ‘self-reflexive’ phase (still displaying subcultural traits). It is marked by the birth of social networks and their worldwide boom (2007-2010), and by the creation of Internet meme-dedicated resources; namely, thematic websites with structured galleries, usually offering semi-automatic tools for the ‘dummy-proof’ creation of memes as well. The most important among them are *I Can Has Cheezburger* (2007), *Memegenerator* (2009), *Quickmeme* (2010), and *Know Your Meme* (2008). The latter is a systematic census of Internet memes that collects, catalogues, and studies them using qualitative and quantitative-statistical methods.<sup>11</sup>

### *Internet memes as a non-systematized field of research*

Internet memes have not been systematically studied yet by any of the possibly pertinent disciplinary perspectives: philosophy, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics or, surprisingly, even memetics (none of the 45 articles published by the *Journal of Memetics*, established in 1997 and closed in 2005, concerns the Internet).<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, key hints have come from linguistics. Authors have analyzed the language employed by the Internet memes (cf. Zappavigna 2012) and specific memes (such as the *LOLcats*; cf. Gawne and Vaughan 2012, Fiorentini 2013), but still no systematic study on the topic has been produced (David Crystal, one of the leading Internet linguists, does not even mention Internet memes; cf. Crystal 2006, 2011), although general interpretations of the phenomenon, from the standpoint of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, have been proposed (cf. Blommaert 2014, Varis and Blommaert 2014).

Media studies, operating at the intersection of sociology, critical theory, ethnography, and marketing, is the most advanced area in the field. Key quantitative research and analyses (cf. Burgess and Green 2009, Berger and Milkman 2012), theoretical elaborations (cf. Metahaven 2012, Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013), and definitions (cf. Constine 2009, 2013, Davison 2012, Milner 2012) have been provided, as well as the best attempt at a general systematization to date (cf. Shifman 2013; on the basis of research started in 2007). Key contributions to a global understanding of the phenomenon have also come from literary and educational research (cf. Lankshear and Knobel 2003, 2007). A fertile point of departure for a semiotic approach to Internet memes can be provided by one of the most established typologies in the field of narratology; Internet memes can be studied as ‘hypertexts’, according to the terminology proposed by Gérard Genette.

## Approaching Internet memes semiotically

### *Texts in contact: Transtextuality*

Deepening the notion of ‘dialogism’, proposed in the 1930s by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), and developing that of ‘intertextuality’, a neologism coined in 1966 by Julia Kristeva (1978), Gérard Genette (1997) shows that textuality is always a matter of ‘in-betweenness’, namely of ‘trans-textuality’. He identifies five levels of relation of one text to another, in order to define a model capable to explain how texts are generated and work as a system.

- **Architextuality:** The relation of a given text with texts that are similar to it, namely with pre-existing texts, considered as a coherent tradition (‘genre’ and ‘style’ are key notions in the architextual level of a text);
- **Intertextuality:** The relation of a given text with one or more that are included in it, according to different degrees of (a) allusion, (b) quotation, and (c) plagiarism;
- **Hypertextuality:** The relation of a given text with the one or more it has been derived from; the derivative text, namely the hypertext, may be generated through a process of:
  - **Transformation:** It is called (a) parody (if it is playful), (b) travesty (satirical), (c) transposition (serious; e.g., translation);
  - **Imitation:** It is called (a) pastiche (playful), (b) caricature (satirical), (c) forgery (serious).
 The hypertext implicates the knowledge of the original text, namely the hypotext (which, in this sense, is included in the derivative one);
- **Metatextuality:** The relation of a given text with the one or more it talks about, comments on, explains etc.; a review or a critical essay are typical metatexts;
- **Paratextuality:** The relation of a given text with its complementary elements, its ‘thresholds’ (cf. Genette 1989), namely – in the case of a book – its title, subtitle, cover artwork, footnotes, appendixes, illustrations etc.

The fact that a text may be manipulated and reused suggests that the more the text is made up by discrete units or blocks, the more it may be manipulated and reused. Umberto Eco (1977: 139, 1994: 157-158; cf. also Jachia 2006: 58-62) ascribed the success of a variety of literary and media texts (including the *Bible*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Hamlet*) to their ‘incoherence’ (*sgangheratezza*, or the property of being unhinged), which ‘also means “dismountability”’ (Eco 1994: 157, *sgangherabilità*, or the property of being made unhinged). These texts, such as the ‘cult’ movie *Casablanca*, are dismountable, ‘endlessly deformable’, and their single components ‘become quotations, archetypes’ (Eco 1994: 158; my trans.). Eco maintains that the whole system of seriality (popular or genre fiction, comic books, TV series etc.) seems to be conceived to be dismountable.

Whereas Eco talks of a ‘block form’ that connotes texts as loose and non-structured (*senza forma*, or formless; Eco 1994: 158), Jacques Geninasca considers ‘modularity’ quite differently, nevertheless as something essential in the efficacy of a text. Geninasca talks of ‘serial syntagms’ to define a ‘coherent proposition that has the form of a finite series of terms, whatever its linguistic nature and dimension may be’ (1992: 16, 2000: 87; my trans.)—namely, to identify an autonomous text made up by smaller parts, and constituting a minimal, rhythmic structure. The notion of ‘serial syntagm’ has been fruitfully applied to music videos (cf. Peverini 2004) and digital media such as Web banners (cf. Polidoro 2002).

### *Transtextuality revisited: Replica practices*

In the age of ‘digital reproducibility’ (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin), the categories of intertextuality and hypertextuality have been declined into a wide typology of digital intervention. It is possible to talk of ‘replica practices’ (cf. Dusi and Spaziante 2006), namely ‘shared procedures of invention, originated both from memories and textual archives, which embody consolidated practices of production and enjoyment inside texts

themselves' (Spaziante 2010: 5). These 'practices of reproducibility' or of 'digital bricolage'<sup>13</sup> are epitomized in the sampling, the remixing, and the remaking. According to Lucio Spaziante (2007: 153-155), these three forms are characterized by different degrees of reinterpretation of a pre-existing text:

- **Appropriative reinterpretation (Sampling):** The extraction of a segment from a pre-existing text (Genette's intertextuality, quotation). If the text that includes the sample employs it at a structural level (such as in musical loops), it is possible to talk of a proper hypertextuality, of a hypertext and a hypotext (i.e., the pre-existing text that has been sampled);
- **Manipulative reinterpretation (Remixing):** The modification of a pre-existing text as regards one or more of its structural components (Genette's transformation). A musical remix usually modifies one or more of the following elements of the pre-existing musical text: voice, melody, single instrument's track, rhythmic patterns, sound spatialization etc. Remixing can be considered a hyponym – i.e., a specific type – of sampling, as the modification it implements involves, horizontally, the whole original text, and not only, vertically, one of its parts;
- **Reinterpretation proper (Remaking):** The re-creation of a pre-existing text, with no regard to its original matter of expression or medium (Genette's imitation). The cover version of a song or the adaptation of a novel into film (a case of 'intersemiotic translation' or 'transmutation'; cf. Jakobson 1959) are typical remakes.

Internet memes comprise a widespread range of popular practices of textual sampling, remixing, and remaking, and, as such, are powerful means of transmission of a wide range of social and cultural contents.

### Semiotics of spreadability: A systematic perspective

#### *Spreadability: A new paradigm for the new media*

Henry Jenkins (cf. Jenkins, Ford and Green *op. cit.*; on the basis of research started in 2007) strongly questions the concepts of 'virality' and 'meme'. He rejects the unconsciousness and passivity these two terms implicate and assign to users—'viral contents' would 'infect' people (almost in a 'hypodermic-needle theory' fashion) and 'memes' would propagate autonomously (whereas Dawkins himself has stressed that they should not be considered as totally 'independent agents'). Even though 'virality' and 'meme' are evocative, potent concepts, Jenkins proposes to employ a more fine-grained category, in order to acknowledge users' agency (he has always been interested in the pragmatics of media and the active role of communities; cf. 1992).

The idea is that the textual practices identified by terms such as 'viral' and 'meme' owe their efficacy not so much to mechanisms of mimicry (cf. Blackmore 1998) or virality (cf. Dawkins 1993), but to the capability of stimulating the participation of users or, in other words, activating their agency. Such texts convey the idea of being manipulated and of creating other texts out of them. Internet memes are 'ergodic' texts (cf. Aarseth 1997), requiring active work by users: they need to be sampled, remixed, and remade.

Jenkins proposes to identify texts such as Internet memes with the category of 'spreadable media', where the neologism 'spreadability' should be understood as a 'metaphoric and multidimensional concept, ambiguously in between medium and content' (Boccia Artieri 2013: 330; my trans.). In fact, texts are 'spreadable' due to the interlacement of different, inseparable dimensions: intrinsic properties of the content as such, technological and communicative structures, economic structures, and online and offline social networks.

Theodor W. Adorno (1941) had already proposed a twofold model to explain the spread of popular music songs. On the one hand, he referred to 'standardization' (songs are built according to crystallized schemes that make them immediately recognizable as part of a given genre, namely a 'context of use'), which is related to structural and semantic features of the text itself. On the other, he referred to 'plugging' (in order to turn them into hits, songs are played repeatedly by radio broadcasts, are put into films, commented on by journalists etc.),

which is related to the technological, economic, and social structures involved in the transmission of the text (both in the case of what nowadays we call ‘top-down’ or ‘branded’ content and ‘bottom-up’ or ‘grassroots’ content).

The category of ‘spreadability’ identifies a new dynamic paradigm for the contemporary global mediascape, where a given content is spread via different platforms and formats, and can be customized<sup>14</sup>. This is in opposition to the traditional, static one of ‘stickiness’, conceived in a centralized, standardized, and broadcast-oriented system, where a given content is set in a single environment and aims at attracting users to it, building so-called ‘customer loyalty’. The opposition between ‘stickiness’ and ‘spreadability’ can be summed up as follows:

The Migrations of Individuals vs. the Flow of Ideas; Centralized vs. Dispersed Material; Unified vs. Diversified Experiences; Prestructured Interactivity vs. Open-Ended Participation; Attracting and Holding Attention vs. Motivating and Facilitating Sharing; Scarce and Finite Channels vs. Myriad Temporary (and Localized) Networks; Sales Force Marketing to Individuals vs. Grassroots Intermediaries Advocating and Evangelizing; Separate and Distinct Roles vs. Collaboration across Roles. (Jenkins, Ford and Green *op. cit.*: 5-7, 295-300)

As a consequence, in a content design perspective, ‘content is more likely to be shared if it is’: ‘Available when and where audiences want it; Portable; Easily reusable in a variety of ways; Relevant to multiple audiences; Part of a steady stream of material’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green *op. cit.*: 197-198).

Jenkins’ ‘spreadability’ recalls Jonathan Zittrain’s notion of ‘generativity’. A ‘generative system’ or ‘pattern’ is a means ‘designed to accept any contribution that followed a basic set of rules’ (Zittrain 2008: 3), and that ‘is open to reprogramming and thus repurposing by anyone’ (*ivi*: 19). In a generative system, like the PC or the Internet:

There are five principal factors at work: (1) how extensively a system or technology leverages a set of possible tasks; (2) how well it can be adapted to a range of tasks; (3) how easily new contributors can master it; (4) how accessible it is to those ready and able to build on it; and (5) how transferable any changes are to others – including (and perhaps especially) nonexperts. [*ivi*: 71]

The five factors, in other words, are: ‘leverage’, ‘adaptability’, ‘ease of mastery’, ‘accessibility’, and ‘transferability’. ‘The more these qualities are maximised, the more contributors can take part in the system, and generativity can develop and be sustained’ (Börzsei 2013: 10). According to Zittrain, generativity presents both positive and negative aspects, but its indiscriminate proliferation cannot lead to anything but technological, social, and cultural issues.

It must be noted that some of the early Internet memes (e.g., most of the webpages and websites listed earlier) are ascribable to the logic of stickiness (‘many-in-one-location’, according to Davison 2012: 125), rather than to spreadability (‘individuals-in-many-location’, *ibid.*). This suggests that the notion of ‘Internet meme’ is historically motivated, that it has undergone an evolution; most contemporary Internet memes, in fact, are definitely ascribable to the logic of spreadability.

### *An analytical definition of ‘Internet memes’*

In common use, ‘Internet phenomena’, ‘Internet memes’ and ‘virals’ are indiscriminately employed as synonyms and, as such (namely, as folk taxonomies), they ‘lack even an accurate definition’ (Davison 2012: 122). In order to achieve such a definition and to provide a more precise research terminology, we may use the term ‘Internet meme’ to refer not so much to a *text* that virally spreads over the Internet, but to the viral spread of the

*practice* of modifying a text and producing other texts out of it. More specifically, we can define ‘Internet memes’ as follows:

- (i) They are texts,
- (ii) belonging to *different expressive substances*, and usually *syncretic*,
- (iii) deriving from a process of *intervention* upon pre-existing texts,
- (iv) according to *rules* of pertinence and good formation,
- (v) that are characterized by a collectively assigned and recognized *efficacy*,
- (vi) by a *playful* spirit,
- (vii) by the *anonymity* of the creator, and
- (viii) by modalities of diffusion that are repetitive, adaptive, appropriative, and – in general – *participative*.

Point (i) refers to the semiotic notion of ‘text’ as an ‘analyzable meaningful object’ (cf. Note 2). Point (ii) means that memes are multimedial or multimodal texts, usually pictures (static or animated, including verbal parts) and videos. Point (iii) refers to the processes of segmentation, modification, re-creation, and resemantization – namely, *bricolage* (cf. Note 14) – that are implemented in order to spread the memes (they are hypertexts, replica practices, textual samples, remixes, and remakes). The rules mentioned in point (iv) may be proper formal or procedural schemas; memes’ rules of formation are exhibited by their very structure. The playful spirit mentioned in point (vi) can be humoristic, parodistic (playful transformation; pastiche, in case of imitation), or satirical (travesty, in case of transformation; caricature, in case of imitation), and it actually comes from the efficacy (v) of the text, owed to the presence of a ‘striking element’. The features listed in point (viii), which usually make memes anonymous (vii),<sup>15</sup> make it legitimate to classify them as ‘spreadable texts’.

It should be stressed that by ‘Internet meme’ we actually mean two different yet strictly related entities: an idea, a *type-meme* (or, in other words, the meme *genre*), and the object that materializes it, a *token-meme* (a *text*); the former generates the latter, and the latter recalls the former.

#### *Type- and token-meme: The Happy cat*

Internet memes are texts (token-memes) like the *Happy cat* (the picture of a grey cat who seems to be smiling dazedly, with the superimposed verbal text ‘I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?’; cf. Fig. 1), but also the format, the model, the set of criteria according to which that single text has been created (type-meme). *Happy cat* is the first established LOLcat (it is the text that inaugurated the genre, in 2007), which is a funny picture of a cat featuring a caption (usually in Impact font) written in ‘LOLspeak’ or ‘Kitty pidgin’ (a form of systematic broken English, as one can imagine a cat would talk; cf. Fiorentini *op. cit.*). Only such a text (the picture and the text as a whole is called ‘image macro’), displaying this structure and these features (the picture has to be a photo, not a drawing; it has to be funny, not sad etc.), is a LOLcat, and only a LOLcat. Otherwise, we can talk of a parody of a LOLcat, or of another Internet meme.





**Figure 1.** The *Happy cat* (2007). The original picture, uncaptioned, dates back to 2003.

### *The problem of typology*

Lankshear and Knobel's (2007) self-declared 'provisional' typology identifies four main types of memes according to their purposes. The typology has been built on the basis of a corpus of 19 Internet memes, selected with regard to the buzz they generated across online communities and mainstream media, and is both thematic ('what do Internet memes talk about?') and pragmatic ('how can Internet memes be used in social discourse?'):

Social commentary (People concerned with displays of good citizenship; Tongue-in-cheek, socially-oriented, political critique interests; Social activist or advocacy interests); Absurdist humour (Music video clip, animation and movie parody interests; Photoshoppers; Absurd discussion forum post interests; Geek humor interests); Otaku and manga (Macabre interests); Hoax (Prankster interests).  
[Lankshear and Knobel 2007: 218]

Limor Shifman (2013) provides a list of six common features concerning 'memetic videos', on the basis of a corpus collected with regard to 'YouTube's popularity measures of the top 100 "most viewed," "most responded," "most discussed," and "most favorite" videos, as well as user playlists of Internet memes' (Shifman 2013: 73): '[A focus on] Ordinary people; Flawed masculinity; Humor (Playfulness<sup>16</sup>, Incongruity<sup>17</sup>, Superiority<sup>18</sup>); Simplicity; Repetitiveness; Whimsical content' (Shifman 2013: 74-84).

With regard to ‘memetic photos’, Shifman claims they ‘share two prevalent features: image *juxtaposition* and *frozen motion*’ (ivi: 89; my italics). She also identifies nine major Internet meme genres: ‘Reaction Photoshops; Photo Fad; Flash Mob; Lipsynch; Misheard Lyrics; Recut Trailers; LOLCats; Stock Character Macros; Rage Comics’ (Shifman 2013: 99-118). Shifman adds that the ‘Meme Genres’:

Can be divided into three groups: (1) Genres that are based on the *documentation of “real-life” moments* (photo fads, flash mobs). [...] (2) Genres that are based on *explicit manipulation* of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated content (reaction Photoshops, lipdubs, misheard lyrics, recut trailers). These genres [...] may be grouped as “remix” memes [...]. (3) Genres that evolved around *a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content* (LOLCats, rage comics, and stock character macros). [Shifman 2013: 118]

Despite their great usefulness in identifying some key features of Internet memes, both Lankshear and Knobel’s and Shifman’s typologies cannot be considered ‘systematic’. They present a non-homogeneous segmentation of the memetic continuum, suggesting classes that actually focus on different levels of semantic pertinence and that could have been better organized in terms of hyponymity-hypernymity (in particular, some aspects that are strictly related have been categorized separately). Besides, a few assumptions seem pretty arguable (e.g., why should ‘Otaku and Manga’ topics express ‘macabre interests’?; many highly successful Internet memes do not display ‘a focus on ordinary people’, and many are far from being definable as ‘simple’ texts). Furthermore, because they are mainly focused on the semantic facets of the phenomenon, the typologies cannot take into account the different ways in which Internet memes are built, considering them, *de facto*, as a structurally homogenous set of texts (which they are not).

In fact, the structure of memes is a key dimension as it presents, *in nuce*, the more or less explicit instructions and the different possible operations users are allowed to apply on texts in order to use them concretely. In other words, structure is strictly related to the pragmatics of the texts. We may outline two different and complementary typologies of Internet memes; a *syntactic* and a *semantic* one.

### *Syntactic typology*

Through the structure a meme displays, it is possible to infer the kind of agency a user is allowed and invited to implement in order to spread the meme itself; depending on the structure, it is possible to distinguish between different degrees of intervention, namely between different operations that can be implemented *upon* the meme and *on the basis of* the meme.

We may identify three syntactic macro-types within a memetic continuum of the Internet phenomena; with *ready-made* memes (and *spreader*-users) and memes that have *to be created on purpose* (and *creator*-users) at the opposite extremes, and whatever meme has to be *modified* to be spread set in the middle. We may call Genette’s hypotext as ‘source’ or ‘mother’ text, and hypertext as ‘target’ or ‘child’ text; each class of the typology includes both source and target texts, for the very nature of the memes lies in their inter-objectivity (a text is a meme to other texts, namely its source text and child text).

Three different ways of spreading an Internet meme can be identified. This is a pragmatic typology, with a focus on the perlocutionary dimension of the text; namely, on the level of the psychological consequences of the text and of the effect of getting someone to do or realize something. To paraphrase Northrop Frye (1957), we may talk of three ‘memetic radicals’:

- **Spreading** (sharing, copying, posting)
- **Transforming** (sampling, remixing, customizing)
- **Imitating** (remaking, re-creating, re-enacting).

Proper memes are texts that need to be transformed to be meaningful to the user; namely, they require a transformation of the source text to exist.

The following theoretical assumptions are mainly based on a corpus of both established and emerging memes – ‘the many as possible’ – labeled as ‘most popular’ in September-October 2013 by the reference website *Know Your Meme*<sup>19</sup>.

### *Ready-mades*

These texts are memes at the ‘zero degree’, as they do not require any transformation prior to their use; they just have to fit a given context. They ‘travel’, they can be shared, posted, and commented on; they identify so-called ‘Internet clichés’ and, if they spread outwards (breaking the ‘tipping point’), ‘virals’. They present themselves to the user as ‘discrete’ (cf. Constine 2009), semantically full units. When generated by manipulation of a pre-existing text, the source text has been modified only once, and for all; albeit target texts may present variations that do not implicate any change in the meaning (cf. Fig. 2). They are ‘founder-based memes’, according to Shifman (2013: 58). Any possible text featuring a ‘striking element’ (cf. *supra*; par. 3.2) that circulates over the Internet can be seen as a ready-made spreadable text.

Prototypical examples: Emoticons; hashtags; catchphrases; Internet clichés such as *Facepalm*, *Rage faces*, *Bitch please*, *You don’t say?*, *True story*, *WTF*, *wat*, *It’s a trap*, *Swag*, *dat ass*; virals such as the *Susan Boyle sings* videos and the *Kony 2012* campaign.



Figure 2. Different versions of the Jackie Chan *What the fuck* (WTF) meme (2009).

### *Samples and remixes*

These texts present themselves as an assemblage of different elements. Once the source text has been modified (once the sample has been extracted or the text has been remixed), the new text is spread as such. The manipulations of the source text can be additive or subtractive (the latter is the case with many Internet cliché ‘faces’ that are stylized; e.g., Nicolas Cage’s face in *You don’t say?*). Textual sample memes have actually two source texts; the one serves as a ‘background’, the other as the intertextual fragment constituting what we have called the ‘striking element’ (cf. *supra*). This is the case with ‘meme icons’, namely the figures and faces of recurring, highly recognizable characters that are pasted onto or inserted into pre-existing pictures thanks to Photoshop and similar photo-editing applications (cf. Fig. 3); the prototype of such memes is probably *Bert* (a Muppet from the *Sesame Street* show; cf. Börzsei 2013: 7-8).

Prototypical examples: Meme icons or character-based memes such as *Pedobear*, *Kim Jong-un*, *Potato Jesus*, *Disaster girl*, *Pepper spray cop*, *Jesus doing everyday things* (sample); photoshopped pictures in general (sample and remix); mashup videos such as the *Thom Yorke dance* or the *Songify* videos (remix); loop videos such as *Trololo* (sample and remix).

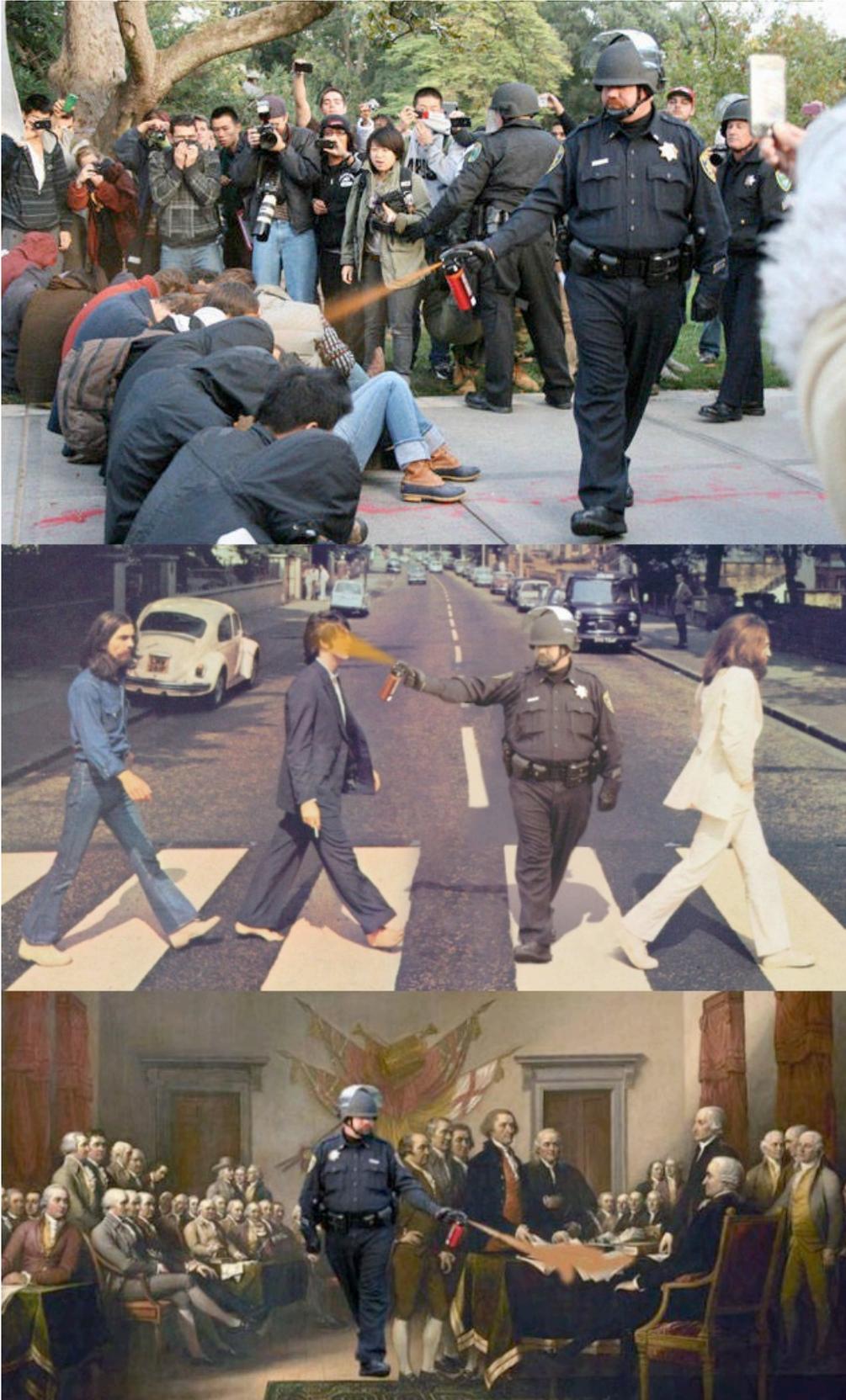


Figure 3. The *Pepper spray cop* meme icon (2011). At the top, the original photo.

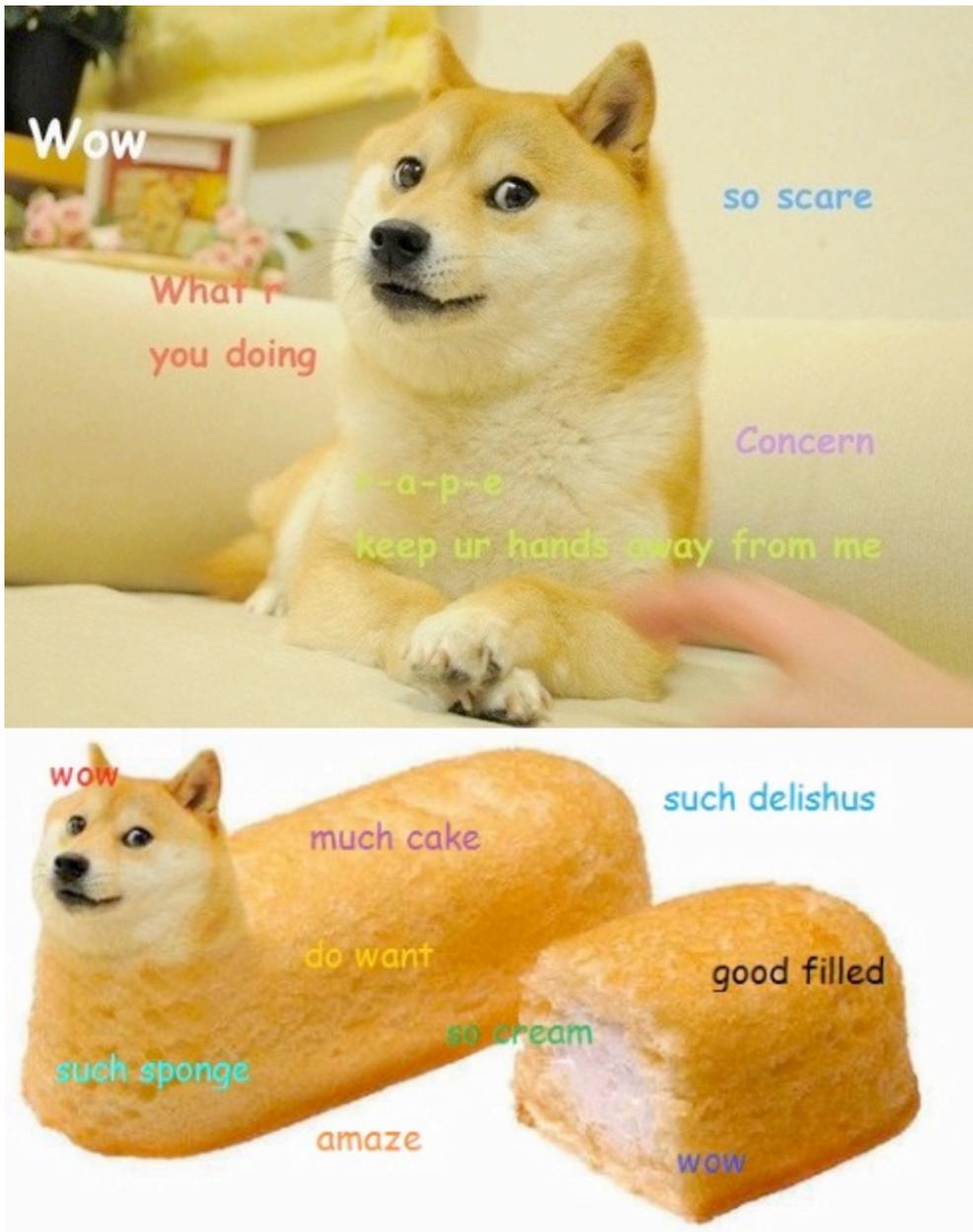


Figure 4. The *Advice dog* image macro meme (2006).

An important sub-type of sample-remix texts are the ‘symbiotic’ ones (cf. Constine 2009). The source text features an explicit ‘formula’ (cf. Constine 2013) or ‘template’ (cf. Rintel 2013), made up by fixed elements and variable elements that have to be filled or modified (according to a ‘guided remix’ practice; cf. Fig. 4). The model text is modified (the variable elements of the template are modified) from time to time, in order to make the result suitable to a given context or purpose. A new symbiotic text is the modification of a pre-existing model symbiotic text of the same ‘species’; both the hypo- and the hyper- texts are symbiotic (we may define such memes as ‘cannibalistic’). These texts present themselves as structuring units of meaning, rather than autonomous semantic units. The presence of a more or less explicit formula or template is what makes it possible not only to *transform* pre-existing texts that display such structure, but to *re-create/imitate* pre-existing texts (cf. *infra*).

Prototypical examples: Formulaic catchphrases such as *Keep Calm and X* (coming from *Keep Calm and Carry On*) and *I can has X?* (from the *Happy cat*), or parodies such as *Berlusconi restituisce cose* (‘Berlusconi gives things back’); all the template image macros modeled upon the *Advice dog*, such as *Condescending Wonka*, *Scumbag David*, *Successful kid*, *Business cat*, *Philosoraptor*, *Socially awkward penguin*, *Overly attached girlfriend*, *Annoying Facebook girl*, *[10] guy*, *Sad Keanu* (Reeves), *Brace yourselves*; dubbed videos such as *Hitler reacts*.

The triadic structure of most of the template image macro memes (picture in the middle, caption at the top and bottom) makes them, according to Geninasca (1992, 2000; cf. *supra*, par. 2.1), a particularly effective serial syntagm. This is because ‘triadic serial syntagms’ display the most effective rhythmic structure, ‘the smallest form in which we are able to recognize the alternation of tension and resolution’ (Polidoro *op. cit.*: 189, my trans.).



**Figure 5.** The *Doge* meme (2013). At the top, the original template meme, at the bottom, a sample-remix/ photoshopped picture.

Many Internet memes provide both icons and image macros. Figures such as Chuck Norris, *Grumpy cat*, *Doge*, and *Ridiculously photogenic guy* are both faces users stick onto pictures in order to resemanticize and refunctionalize them, and proper template memes that users engage in customizing. In *Doge*, on the one hand, the dog's head is pasted onto pre-existing pictures and, on the other, the original colored Comic Sans captions are substituted with new keywords (cf. Fig. 5).

### *Mimetic texts*

These texts are imitational (Shifman 2013 employs the notion of 'mimesis' *passim*) because they remake a given, pre-existing text. They usually re-create the formula or template upon which the original text is built (namely, they are usually symbiotic; cf. *supra*). They can be 'performative' (cf. Banks 2011; cf. Fig. 6) as well,

being the result of what might be called a ‘memetic practice’, such as re-enacting the action shown in the photo or video that serves as the source text. Another typical memetic practice is *Rickrolling* (from ‘Rick’ + ‘trolling’); namely, linking the video of Rick Astley’s song *Never Gonna Give You Up* to a user who expects the disguised link to be a useful resource. The early Internet meme *Hampster dance* (cf. *supra*; par. 1.5) was employed in a similar way.

Prototypical examples: Photo fads such as *photobombing*, *planking*, *fingerstache*, *face masking*; thematic photo series such as the *LOLcats*; thematic selfies such as the *Pretty girls/ugly faces* and the *sellotapes*; reaction videos such as the ones to the infamous *2 girls 1 cup*; flash mob videos such as the ones derived from *Gangnam Style* and *Harlem Shake*;<sup>20</sup> response/parody videos such as the ones derived from the *Leave Britney alone* video; campaign videos such as the *Ice bucket challenge*; automatic generators of sentences mocking a given personality’s style.



Figure 6. An ‘attempt at “stocking” using a photo of an owl’ (from Banks 2011).

### *Remarks upon syntactic typology*

The second syntactic category works by transformation (they are samples and remixes), while the third works by imitation (remakes). All but the first category, and particularly both the transformational and imitational symbiotic texts, can be interpreted, as we have seen, as serial syntagms introducing ‘a puzzle or problem that needs to be solved through creative responses’ (Shifman 2013: 97; Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013: 209-211) talk of an ‘unfinished content’. These memes can be modified *ad libitum* on purpose; they are ‘egalitarian memes’, according to Shifman (2013: 58). They set the *theme* or the *topic* of the discourse by themselves; they embed their own theme or topic. On the contrary, so-called ‘ clichés ’ rather serve as a *comment*, *rheme* or *focus* to the pre-existing theme or topic of the context (e.g., all the *Rage faces* or any text that is used as an emoticon, to express a feeling, a sentiment, an evaluation, a judgment).

In a static perspective, the three syntactic categories identify textual formats and single texts. In a dynamic perspective, they identify the phases of a possible process of hypertextual production, so that from the source

text – which serves as a ready-made – it is possible to generate the textual sample-remix, and from this the mimetic text (cf. Fig. 7). Each of them can, in turn, serve as a ready-made spreadable text, as exemplified by such texts as the mashup videos—remixes that, besides stimulating the production of other mashups, spread autonomously as Internet clichés or proper songs (e.g., the *Songify's Can't hug every cat* and *Reality hits you hard bro*).



**Figure 7.** *Charlie bit my finger* (2007, [http://youtu.be/\\_OBgSz8sSM](http://youtu.be/_OBgSz8sSM)), an example of hypertextual/memetic generativity: from the original photo, to the remix, to the mimicry (from Shifman 2013: 20).



An advantage of such a typology, which focuses on meme structure and on the possible material operations that are allowed upon the text (as the text has been created according to them), is that it leaves possible 'open positions' for memes yet to come, a possibility that thematic typologies cannot allow.

According to such a perspective, 'virality' stands as a sur-categorization. The notion of 'virality' implies that a given text quickly spreads outwards, but it does not involve any particular textual requirement, nor a manipulation of a pre-existing text. Not all virals are Internet memes (not all virals have a memetic structure) and not all memes go viral (not all texts that have a memetic structure go viral), even though it is easy to witness the two categories overlapping and hypertextual proliferation is a symptom of viral success.

In short: internet memes – second and third category proper – are different but usually syncretic kinds of texts, such as captioned pictures and videos, that circulate over the Internet thanks to a hypertextual spread (from the original token-meme, established as type-meme, to the token-memes), namely through a process of transformation (sample, remix) or imitation (remake). On the contrary, virals are texts that spread without any manipulation. Memes display different structures that mirror their creator's different operations of manipulation and, in turn, invite users to spread, modify, or re-create them in a similar way.

### *Viral vs. meme: First Kiss*

*First Kiss*, a video<sup>21</sup> directed by Georgian artist Tatia Pilevia on commission by Los Angeles fashion brand Wren, is a case of successful viral marketing – uploaded on YouTube on March 10, 2014, it reached 47 million views in four days – that became a meme (type, model) by generating memes (tokens, variations). The format of the video (couples of 'strangers' meeting for the first time, overcoming shyness, and eventually kissing; black and white hi-definition photography etc.) constitutes its memetic structure (the meme as a textual model), while its parodies (*Firsthandjob*, *Firstsniff*, *Firstlick*, *First snog*; actually, pastiches and caricatures) and imitations (*First Kiss: i baci a Torino sono veri* ['in Turin kisses are true']; forgeries) constitute its memetic replicas (its hypertextual proliferation through mimetic-performative texts).

### *Semantic typology: Indications for a semiotic mapping*

Following the tradition that stemmed from Jean-Marie Floch's four-valORIZATION (Practical, Utopian, Aesthetic-Playful, Critical) semiotic square (1992), namely Andrea Semprini's 'semantic positioning' (1993) and Guido Ferraro's 'discursive systems' (1999), it would be possible to outline the mutual positioning of each Internet meme through a semiotic mapping—namely, to place the possible Internet meme genres within a semantic perspective.

- **Thematic mapping:** A first semantic mapping may be focused on the themes carried by the memes; namely, any possible topic, issue or discursive area (e.g., 'food memes', 'sex memes', 'protest memes', and other topic-specific memes);
- **Figurative mapping:** A second mapping may be focused on the figures – 'actors', according to Algirdas J. Greimas' terminology – employed to figurativize such themes. It would be possible to identify individual or collective memes; namely, memes that are based on a main character (such as the *Advice dog*) and serial or categorical memes (such as the *LOLcats*).

It would be possible to connect the themes and figures mappings, as the same theme can be carried by different figures and the same figure can carry different themes. By connecting themes and figures, it would be possible to identify polarities (e.g., 'establishment vs. minority memes').

Thanks to such typology it is easy to highlight the critical points in Lankshear and Knobel's one; their 'Social commentary' indiscriminately includes practical and critical values, while the aesthetic-playful

valorization seems to be split into two different categories ('Absurdist humour' and 'Hoax', whereas the latter has critical nuances that would need to be made explicit). A semiotic typology allows to have a clearer view of the single types (e.g., 'Otaku and Manga' seems to fit a utopian valorization).

*Punctum: The 'striking element' as a 'mistake'*

With thorough analysis, it is possible to identify a unique element that holds a wide and heterogeneous set of texts such as Internet memes together. They always display a 'striking element', a *punctum* (cf. Barthes 1980), which is, *lato sensu*, a 'mistake'. The memetic category of 'mistake' encompasses everything from 'grammatical mistake' (such as the broken English of the early meme *All your base are belong to us* and misconstructions like 'Much noble, so respect' in *Doge*; *LOLcats* are entirely based on broken English), to 'ambiguity' (the 'impossible pictures' studied in Leone 2014), 'oddity' (*wat*, *Potato Jesus*, *Songify* videos, most image macros like *Condescending Wonka*), 'exaggeration' (*Rage faces*, *Overly attached girlfriend*, *Chuck Norris facts*, reaction and loop videos, *Hitler reacts*), or 'inadequacy' (*Ridiculously photogenic guy*, *Rickrolling*, *photobombing*), in aspect (Nicolas Cage's face stylized in *You don't say?*) or behavior (the inexcusable *Pepper spray cop*). In other words, this 'mistake' is everything that can convey the idea of 'incongruity', a classic mechanism of comedy (cf. Shifman 2013: 79-80; cf. *supra*, par. 3.4).

In the case of a proper meme, that is a derived text, the 'mistake' featured in the pre-existing text is selected, put under the spotlight, and spread. The source text's 'mistake' is the 'semantic hook' that catches the user's attention, making the text susceptible to memetic selection and dissemination; just like the prominent and peculiar physical features of a given public figure make him or her subject to parody and imitation. The bigger the 'mistake', the more whimsical the text is, the more the incongruity is evident, and the more the humorous effect is obtained. In other words, 'Never a failure, always a meme'.

As Shifman notices, many – if not most – of the Internet memes show a situation that, in origin, was 'unintentionally, or at least not clearly intentionally, funny' (cf. Note 18). In this sense, memes display a kind of 'post-irony' (cf. Maddy 2012). On the one hand, the irony they display is assigned *ex post*, it is a 'found irony'; discovered by the creator-user in the source text and perpetrated autonomously as the prominent element in the target text. On the other, due to such decontextualization, 'when that ironic reproduction is reproduced repeatedly, the multiplicity eventually neutralizes the irony being signified by virtue of its redundancy' (*ibid.*). In other words, 'the irony of pointing out the irony of something that wasn't really meant ironically isn't so ironic after all' (*ibid.*). Such memes seem to work like deforming magnifying glasses.

**Conclusions: Toward a pragmatics of Internet memes**

To sum it up, a typical Internet meme – a category that constitutes, *de facto*, the best and main example of a spreadable text – features a 'syntactic hook' (a modular structure, formula or template) and a 'semantic hook' (a striking element, a *punctum*, usually a 'mistake' being superimposed onto a basic semantic nucleus).<sup>22</sup> The virality or spreadability of Internet memes lies in these two basic features and in their balancing. The one works on users' agency, the other on users' engagement. Regarding both, 'affordance' (Gibson 2014, Eco 1997: 137-139) and 'competence' (Stéfani 1982) are key concepts; memes offer elements to users' agency and codified ways to access them (affordance), and users have to be equipped with a specific knowledge in order to recognize and employ such elements (competence). We may talk of a proper 'meme literacy' (Milner 2012; cf. also Lankshear and Knobel 2007), declined into a wide range of 'stylistic practices' (cf. Eckert 2006). A spreadable text has to be striking (semantics) and has to let users engage in bricolage operations according to different degrees of intervention (syntax); the more the text is striking, the more its structure is evident, the more the text



2. In semiotic terms, 'the main feature of a "text" is [...] to be an *explicative model*, rather than an *ontological* reality and, as such, to be determined, from time to time, according to the needs of the analysis. In other words, semiotics does not *seek* "texts" among its possible objects of analysis; on the contrary, it *considers* its object of analysis as a "text", which is the environment wherein the process of "meaning-making" takes place, with no regard to the specific nature of the object, which may indifferently be a novel, a picture, a dance, a square in a city, a shop window, and so forth' (Mangano 2008: 144; my trans. and italics).
3. Cf. Dawkins 1993.
4. The first version of the *Wikipedia* entry *Meme* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>) dates back to November 2001 and makes reference to the Internet as a pertinent field. In the August 15, 2004 version of the entry *List of Internet Phenomena* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Internet\\_phenomena](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Internet_phenomena)) it is written that 'The individual articles from 'The Best Page in the Universe often spread memetically'. Afterwards, the very same day, the category 'Internet memes' is added to the entry. On September 3, the sentence 'Internet phenomena are often referred to as memes' is included and, afterwards, the very same day, it is edited into 'Most Internet phenomena can be often seen as good examples of memes, the self-propagating ideas'.
5. *Wikipedia*, *List of Internet Phenomena* entry.
6. The examples are taken from the September 3, 2004 version of the entry *List of Internet Phenomena* and from the December 11, 2006 version of the entry *Internet meme* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet\\_meme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_meme)) on *Wikipedia*.
7. The Internet is a network of computer networks that carries information via a variety of languages known as 'protocols'. The Web (World Wide Web) is an information-sharing model that is built over the medium of the Internet and uses the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), just one of the many languages spoken over the Internet. Whereas the Web uses the Internet, not all the Internet services use the HTTP to work (notably, emails).
8. Facebook was created in 2004, but became accessible outside of the USA the following year.
9. <http://www.4chan.org/>.
10. <http://www.reddit.com/>.
11. *Know Your Meme* is partially a wiki project. Users can submit meme entries, but each single submitted meme has to be researched by the editorial staff in order to get the status of a 'confirmed meme' phenomenon. In 2011 the website was acquired by the Cheezburger company.
12. Cf. <http://cfpm.org/jom-emit/>.
13. 'Bricolage' is a notion proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) to describe the characteristic patterns of mythological thought. Bricolage is opposed to the engineer's creative thinking, which proceeds from goals to means on the basis of an established, coherent system of general and tested assumptions. Mythical thought, on the contrary, attempts to re-use the available means and materials in order to solve new problems. The notion of 'bricolage' has been prominently recovered and developed by Jean-Marie Floch (2006).
14. Henry Jenkins' 'convergence culture' (2006) is not in conflict with 'spreadable media'; on the contrary, while the former is a cultural system wherein technologies are content- and user-oriented, the latter is the media system that provides the means by which these contents can reach the users. 'Convergence' does not mean 'centralization'.
15. 'For Davison, the key to the success of Internet memes and their generative nature is the explicit *removal of authorship*, which he calls the "nonattribution meme"' (Mandiberg 2012: 6; my italics).
16. Limor Shifman underlines that 'Like game-playing, humor is enjoyed for its own sake' (2013: 79).
17. Shifman underlines that 'Comedy derives from an unexpected cognitive encounter between two incongruent elements' (*ibid.*).

18. Shifman underlines that such videos ‘Feature people who are unintentionally, or at least not clearly intentionally, funny’ (*ivi*: 81).
19. <http://web.archive.org/web/20130928152154/http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/popular>.
20. The genealogy of the *Harlem Shake* meme is rather complex; cf. Marino 2014.
21. <https://youtu.be/IpbDHxCV29A>.
22. Jean Burgess (2008) proposes the notion of ‘textual hook’. The term ‘hook’ is here employed in the musicological sense; in fact, in memetics, a ‘hook’ is the name given to a ‘co-meme’, namely the part of the memplex that needs the replica—usually a logic consequence, a corollary of a given meme. Jacques Geninasca (2000) would have probably talked of ‘molar’ and ‘semantic grasp’ (regarding the semantics), and of ‘rhythmic’ or ‘impressive’ grasp (regarding the syntax).
23. According to the threefold model provided by Rick Altman (1999).

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