

Kiley Jolicoeur, Syracuse University
Rachel Ivy Clarke, Syracuse University

It's Only a Meme if It's from the Knowledge Organization Region of Information Science, Otherwise It's Just a Tweet.

Abstract

In this short paper, we conducted a preliminary investigation of how internet memes use knowledge organization concepts in their transmission and communication of messages. Using classification, thesaural relationships, and metadata statements, we examined the employment of knowledge organization in the formula of a common internet meme and how the use of these concepts allowed meme creators to convey their argument.

Introduction

As Web 2.0 has exploded into a regular part of everyday life, the way that we communicate has adapted to the online social spaces that have proliferated. One of the most common yet complex forms of online communication is the internet meme. Internet memes are defined by scholar Limor Shifman (2014, 7-8) as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” Thus not only do these memes achieve a level of virality, but they surpass merely viral content to become memes by virtue of their transformation into many separate but related instantiations at the hands of many users. Each instantiation of a meme is created, as Shifman points out, in “awareness” of other memes, in a dialogue with the other instantiations that prevents individual instantiations to be examined alone, without considering them as a set of related communications. The massive variety of memes that have waxed and waned over the past two decades have taken many forms, ranging from image macros, to gifs, to videos, to text-based. They serve a variety of purposes, from comedy, to political commentary, to deliberately sparking rage in the viewer, none of which are mutually exclusive but rather intersect to create their impact. Since memes are such an integral part of our daily lives, whether we choose to interact with them or not, we must appreciate them as transmitters of cultural information and evaluate them as such. Many memes make explicit statements about how we should consider a concept, and many use knowledge organization (KO) concepts to do so. This short paper will explore how various KO concepts are used in memes and how they potentially contribute to effective communication and transmission. Although the number of internet memes is potentially infinite, for this work we focus our preliminary analysis on one specific meme that has been circulated on many social media platforms.

The meme

“It's only champagne if it's from the Champagne region of France. Otherwise, it's just sparkling wine,” is a common text-based meme that has appeared in many instantiations across platforms, such as the examples from Twitter in *Figures 1-5*.

Figure 1

Tweet from user Alex Marshall, @grlalx, January 7, 2021, reading, "It's only a coup if it comes from the Coup d'état region of France... otherwise it's just sparkling white supremacy."

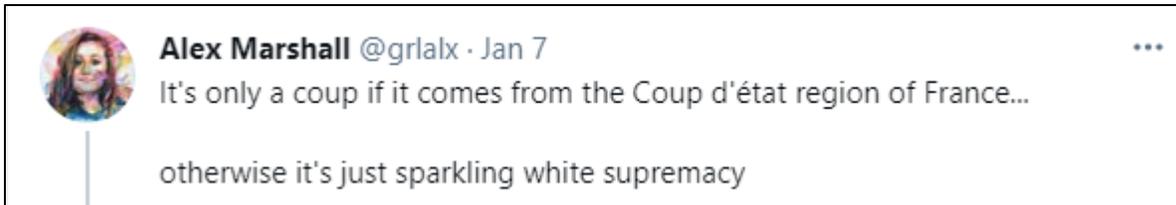


Figure 2

Tweet from user Berrak Sarikaya, @BerrakBiz, June 25, 2020, reading, "It's only Cancel Culture if it originates in the Cancellé region of France. Otherwise it's just sparkling consequences."

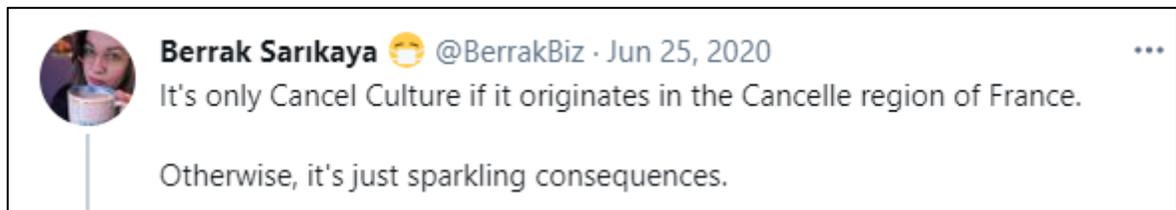


Figure 3

Tweet from user Naomi Kritzer, @NaomiKritzer, June 3, 2020, reading, "It's only TEAR GAS if it comes from the Gaseux Region of France, otherwise it's just Sparkling Mass Repression at the Hands of the State."

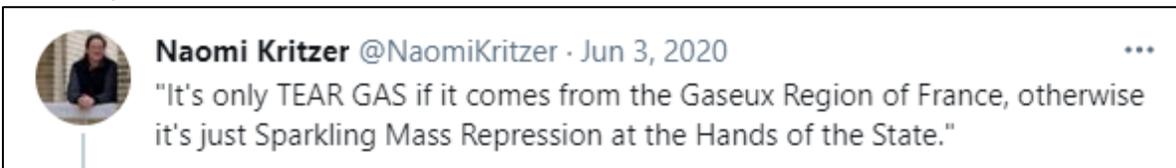


Figure 4

Tweet from user Vikram Paralkar, @VikramParalkar, March 13, 2020, reading, “It’s only Quarantine if it’s in the Quarante province of France. Otherwise it’s just Sparkling Isolation.”



Figure 5

Tweet from user Matty, @Reverend_Banjo, December 13, 2018, reading, “It’s actually only ‘Frankenstein’ if it’s created in the Frankenstein region of France. Otherwise, it’s a sparkling monster.”



The meme’s formula follows from the original instantiation, described above, that sparked the development of the derivatives and can be described as, “It’s only [X] if it’s from [X] region of France. Otherwise, it’s just [Y].” We selected this specific meme because its use of KO concepts seems especially explicit, thus offering a useful entry point into examining the use of KO in memes. Using knowledge organization principles as our lens, we examine instantiations of this meme to reveal the array of ways in which it utilises KO concepts. By examining concepts from classification, including characteristics of division (Ranganathan 1967, Spiteri 1998) and Sayers’ canons (Sayers 1915), controlled vocabularies with a focus on thesaural relationships (Aitchison, Gilchrist, and Bowden 2004, Green 1995), and metadata statements (Duval et al. 2002), we will analyze the formula that is a shared structure between different instantiations of the same meme. We also investigate how memes have the ability to utilize and amplify classification’s expressive power (Bowker and Star 1999, Feinberg 2007 and 2011) in the communication of their messages.

Classification concepts

The earliest known instantiation of this meme format draws from a legal classification that differentiates types of wines. In the United States, champagne is defined by the FDA in the Code of Federal Regulations 27CFR4.21 b2 as “a type of sparkling light wine” with specific production methods “and which possesses the [...] characteristics attributed to champagne as made in the Champagne district of France.” The standard goes on to describe in 27CFR4.21

b3i that sparkling wines that meet some but not all of the criteria for champagne can be described as “champagne style,” “champagne type,” or “American champagne,” with a following descriptor term of how the wine differs from French champagne. The Commission Regulation (EC) No. 753 from 2002 states in Article 30 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2002:118:0001:0054:EN:PDF>) that wines with recognized geographical names can only be named as such in member countries, including champagne. In 2006, the U.S./E.C. Wine Agreement (<https://www.ttb.gov/agreements/us-ec-wine-trade-agreement>) describes a standard of identity for wine and mandates that the U.S. must protect sixteen “semi-generic names,” of which champagne is one, excepting the use of names already approved prior to 2006. A 2005 trade facts sheet from prior to the implementation of the agreement succinctly explains the effect of the agreement on the U.S. industry (https://www.ttb.gov/images/pdfs/trade_facts.pdf).

The legal classification of types of wine and the standard of identity of champagne have already shown us a way in which a less strict form of classification is at play in these memes, creating the format which is transformed into the above examples. Ranganathan’s (1967) characteristic of division is succinctly described by Spiteri (1998, 5) as a characteristic that is used to “distinguish clearly among [the] component parts” of an entity. In this meme, the place of origin is acting as a characteristic of division to distinguish between the two nouns, which in the original meme were “champagne” and “sparkling wine.” In *Figure 1*, the “Coup d’état region of France” acts as the place of origin that is the characteristic of division differentiating a “coup” and “white supremacy.” The fact that the “Coup d’état region of France” doesn’t exist serves to comedically negate the characteristic of division and instead highlight the similarity between the two concepts. *Figure 5* uses the characteristic of division to draw a distinction between “Frankenstein” and a “monster,” but the fact that “the Frankenstein region of France” does not exist then comedically suggests that “Frankenstein” and the “monster” are the same, which can be interpreted as either a commentary on the text of *Frankenstein* itself or a how we have come to casually refer Frankenstein’s monster just as “Frankenstein.” The other examples follow suit, with each meme instantiation using this characteristic of division to draw attention to the similarity between the two concepts, as the place of origin is the biggest difference between them, just as origin in the Champagne region is the greatest difference between champagne and non-champagne sparkling wine. The comedic twist on the place names in the memes in this format gives even more emphasis to the false construction of difference between the two concepts presented in the meme, thereby using the characteristic of division to actually show similarity. This is a novel use of division, taking what would be an act of separation in classification and using it instead to equate two concepts in a specific context.

Thesaural relationships

The meme takes concepts that are not necessarily paradigmatic within the English language and creates a syntagmatic relationship between the two concepts that holds in the present context as Green (1995) describes. For instance, the concept of “Cancel Culture” in *Figure 2*

is not paradigmatic with the concept of “consequences,” but the meme creates a syntagmatic relationship between them. We can also interrogate that syntagmatic relationship by means of thesaural relationships, particularly synonyms. Just as champagne and sparkling wine are not synonyms, because champagne is a type of sparkling wine but not all sparkling wines are champagnes, the concepts expressed in memes of this format are not synonymous either. Aitchison, Gilchrist, and Bowden (2004, 52) describe quasi-synonyms “as terms whose meanings are generally regarded as different in ordinary usage, but they are treated as though they are synonyms” for the purposes of controlled vocabulary construction. In this way, the creators of these memes are creating a quasi-synonymous relationship between the concepts they’re expressing, using the aforementioned characteristic of division to show the similarity between them that is able to create the relationship. In *Figure 1*, the “coup” and “white supremacy” become quasi-synonymous by virtue that there is no “Coup d’état” region of France, so if that characteristic of division is not applicable in this circumstance, “coup” and “white supremacy” are treated as synonymous in this case, which from the date and context it is understood as creating a political statement about the events of January 6, 2021 in the U.S. Capitol.

Furthermore, the way in which the quasi-synonyms are used in a syntagmatic relationship reflects the construction of metadata statements. Although in this case the memes function as ‘data about data’ in a very abstract way, by representing an event or a situation as the above examples do, they are still functioning with an “about” relationship to their topic that is similar enough to explore. As Duval, Hodgins, Sutton, and Weibel (2002, 2a) discuss, “data elements from different schemas as well as vocabularies and other building blocks can be combined in a syntactically and semantically interoperable way,” allowing creators to “snap’ them together much as individual Lego blocks can be assembled into larger structures.” Such too can the parts of these memes be snapped together, with the concepts the creator has chosen fitting into the respective part of the meme. For example, in *Figure 4*, “Quarantine” fits into our spot “X” and “Sparkling Isolation” into our part “Y.” Duval et al. (2002, 2a) argue that this allows creators “to mix a variety of semantic modules within a common syntactic foundation, even though the designers of the modules might not have anticipated a given combination.” This is especially true for memes, as the process of their creation and transmission is complex and often the original instantiation of the meme can’t be identified. Those who are involved in the creation of a meme or of an instantiation of a meme format can’t anticipate what other iterations may be produced, which is part of the comedy and intertextual surprise that comes from them. Having a format into which concepts can be easily snapped makes it far easier for memes to be created and transmitted at a rapid rate while still being understandable.

Expressive power

Sayer’s 17th canon (1915, 32) argues that when selecting “terms, the introduction of any name which exhibits a critical view of the subject it connotes is a violation of one of the first principles of classification.” However, as we can see illustrated in the above figures, the use of classification in these memes often does exactly this. In these three examples, the purpose

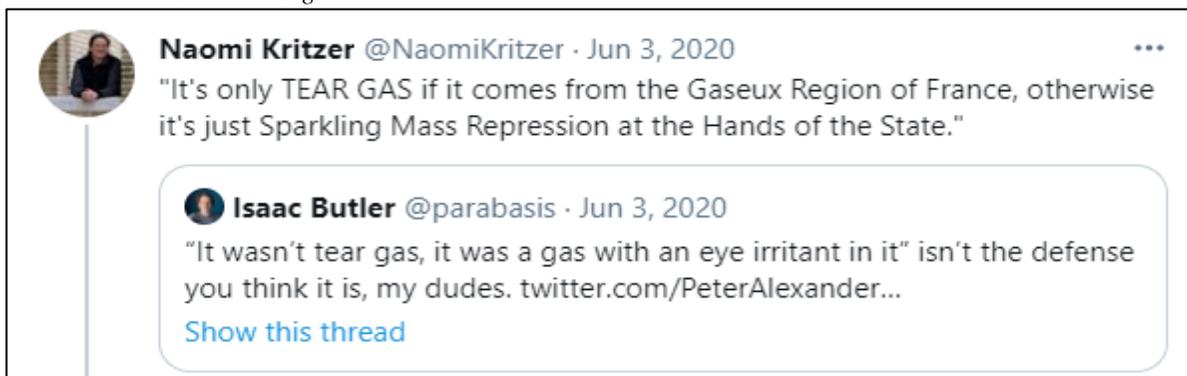
of the meme is, in fact, to express a “critical view” of the concepts being expressed. Sayer’s argument that terms used in classification should be neutral assumes a lack of bias on the part of the person who is selecting the terms, a point which we do not have time to fully refute here, but which is challenged by these memes. As we have seen, classification is being done here, and it is being done using terms with a specific connotation intended by the creator of the meme.

Feinberg (2011, 1018) argues “that information systems may exhibit authorial voice, and that this authorial voice may be used to advance a position on the material collected and organized by the information system.” Feinberg goes on to elaborate that “accordingly, it should be possible to design systems that systematically take advantage of this mechanism” (1018). This is true of the subset of memes explored here, in which classification is expressly being used to present an argument about the concepts, one that represents the opinion of the creator. In *Figures 1, 2, and 3* it is a political argument. In *Figure 4*, it’s an argument about an experience. In *Figure 5*, it’s an argument both about a text and society.

In the same vein, Feinberg (2007, *Discussion*) also argues that “constructing a system to organize information to some extent requires ‘taking a stand’ on how to interpret a knowledge domain; it is both a creative and a critical task. The information system is a medium through which a position on the domain is articulated.” In the case of our memes, they are acting as an information system, constructing statements to organize concepts in relation to each other, as we have discussed, and by doing so they inescapably present opinion. *Figure 3* is perhaps the most interesting example of this in our selections. It was created in response to another tweet, as seen in *Figure 6*.

Figure 6

Tweet from user Isaac Butler, @parabasis, June 3, 2020, reading, “It wasn’t tear gas, it was a gas with eye irritant in it’ isn’t the defense you think it is, my dudes,” in response to a truncated previous tweet, followed by a retweet above by user Naomi Kritzer, @NaomiKritzer, June 3, 2020, reading, “It’s only TEAR GAS if it comes from the Gaseux Region of France, otherwise it’s just Sparkling Mass Repression at the Hands of the State,” as seen also in Figure 3.



The tweet to which the creator is responding is in turn in response to another, as Tweets often are. Butler's tweet suggests that the claim that "tear gas" and "gas with an eye irritant" are distinct is false. Kritzer's meme response presents "tear gas" and "mass repression at the Hands of the State" as quasi-synonyms, advancing her political argument and Butler's as well by taking it a step further.

While such acts may be becoming more explicit in formal classification work, with memes this act of classification is largely tacit. We do not see discussions on the part of the mememakers that they are doing classification, that they chose this approach versus an alternative, that they had in mind this specific scholar's argument rather than another's. The act of classification in this meme happens naturally and reactively. As Bowker and Star (1999, 1) so succinctly state, "to classify is human." They argue that "not all classifications take formal shape or are standardized in commercial and bureaucratic products," but instead "we all spend large parts of our days doing classification work, often tacitly, and we make up and use a range of ad hoc classifications to do so" (1). This tacit classification is what we're seeing in these memes: an individual classificatory statement made to express the creator's opinion.

Additionally, the memes function in relation to each other not just by virtue of being memes, a form which is predicated upon an intertextual dialogue between memes of the same format and often others as well, but also because they operate on the same standard. Bowker and Star describe a standard generally as "any set of agreed-upon rules for the production of (textual or material) objects" (13). The meme format "It's only [X] if it's from [X'] region of France. Otherwise, it's just [Y]" functions as the tacitly agreed-upon standard. It needs to be noted as well that not only is it natural and constant for humans to engage in the act of classification in everyday situations, but that these types of tacit classification are not any less important or revealing than classifications constructed in information science. Feinberg (2007, *Bias and the boundary problem*) argues that an opinion "of experts being closer to 'truth' than laypeople seems also to imply that, even in cases of debate among experts, the dominant or majority view is typically the one that "follows the general rule" and thus is more 'valid,'" which she argues is untrue. Indeed, as we can see here, "laypeople" who presumably have no formal knowledge of KO concepts are employing them not only in ways that they are used in information science, but also creating new uses to suit their purposes.

Conclusion

Through this preliminary investigation, we contribute to examinations of how memes are effective, as well as how and why they are so transmissible, and how KO contributes to this. This must lead us to also consider if content creators who increase their understanding of knowledge organization concepts can create stronger rhetoric and make memes more powerful, especially in the case of political and social commentary. Conversely, we must also consider if we can utilise memes to help teach about knowledge organization concepts. Although this preliminary investigation explores one meme, it serves as an exercise in developing practices that will allow us to extend this study further into other memes,

expanding our understanding of this culturally significant form of communication. Such analysis will provide insight into the ways in which memes can display how classification and knowledge organization more broadly are a natural part of human language and communication, displayed through memes that are created by users who likely have no prior formal understanding of knowledge organization concepts. Further avenues to be explored at a later time will also include investigating the relationship between meme instantiations and how they relate to relationships among information objects, such as FRBR and its applications, and how comedy might inform ways in which KO concepts are employed for specific rhetorical purposes.

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