When metaphor becomes a joke: Metaphor journeys from political ads to internet memes

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Abstract

The relationship between metaphor and humor has long been viewed as one of conceptual similarity in that both phenomena dwell on duality, yet they process it in a different way; metaphor fully resolves the tension between domains while humor does so only partially. This paper aims to offer a novel understanding of this issue by suggesting that metaphor and humor converge, instead, vis-à-vis their evaluative function in discourse. The empirical evidence under examination comes from three political ads that were used for election campaign advertizing in Greece in 2015, each one building on a different scenario of the JOURNEY metaphor (i.e., a train trip, a flight and a taxi ride), and their humorous representations in internet memes that were spread through social media platforms. Aiming to parody the political parties and figures in the political ads, the memes recast the metaphorical conceptualization involved therein in a humorous way, thus giving rise to what I wish to call 'recycled humorous metaphors' (cf. Attardo, 2015). The analysis shows that metaphor and humor serve the particular rhetorical goals of election campaign advertizing and political satire; metaphor through the evaluative frames it evokes and humor through its targets and its function as a means of criticism.
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1. Introduction

In the context of so-called *computer-mediated/technology-mediated discourse*, social media networks seem to play a prominent role in changing existing modes of communication, as well as in initiating new discursive practices. A case in point relates to *internet memes*, that is, ''units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience'' (Shifman, 2013:367). Conceived by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in order to explain cultural evolution, the term *meme* (derived from the Ancient Greek word *μίμημα* 'something that is imitated') initially referred to any cultural unit that is spread from person to person through replication or imitation; such cultural units range from a slogan or a clothing fashion to concepts such as God. With the advancement of technology and the ease of communication via the internet, memes exploit different modalities (including images, videos, and audios) and are quickly shared through social media networks; in this sense, they are *computer-mediated/technology-mediated multimodal artefacts*. As for their function, as Milner points out (2013b:2359), they are aimed at ''satirical humor for public commentary''. Humor is a key feature of internet memes to the effect that they should be considered ''a genre of humor and creativity'' (Dainas, 2015:59).[1]

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[1] On memes see Shifman (2014); on memes and humor see Shifman (2007); on social media and humor see Chovanec and Ermida (2012) and Locher and Bolander (2015) and references therein.

This paper focuses on a particular type of internet memes that mimic election campaign spots in a humorous way. Such memes were massively produced during the two election campaigns that took place in Greece in 2015 (January and September) and were spread through social media networks, where they are still available to the public. Their aim is to *parody* the political ads of the election campaigns and thus target the political parties they represent and the political figures involved. As Dahlgren (2009:139) argues, humor serves to ''strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies, and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse''. Social media platforms and the new genres they afford (with memes probably being such a text type *par excellence*) offer new possibilities for attacking political discourse in a humorous way. Given the ease and the quickness with which they can be produced and shared, internet memes ''can agilely respond to diverse public events'' (Milner, 2013b:2359). Such memes can appear across different types of social media, ranging from ''socializing'' sites such as Facebook, which promote informal social interaction between members, to ''social navigation'' sites such as Youtube, which do not require membership and make resources available to the public (Thelwall and Stuart, 2010:265–266; for an overview of social media platforms see Yus, 2011:115–116).

Such internet memes transform the form or the content of the election campaign spots, a key feature of which is *metaphor*. Metaphor is deemed a powerful persuasive tool in advertizing (see Forceville, 1996 and references therein), as well as in political discourse (see, e.g., Kövecses, 2010; Musolff, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2005; Goatly, 2007). This study focuses on three political ads that build on the JOURNEY metaphor (see Kövecses, 2010), which is commonly used in political argumentation (Musolff, 2004:30–59). The JOURNEY schema is instantiated in a different form (''scenario'' in Musolff's (2004) terminology) in every political ad: as a train trip, as a flight, and as a taxi ride. The result in each case is a *multimodal metaphor*, which comprises both a visual and a verbal component.[2] When mimicking the political ad, the parodies recast the original metaphor (which can be already humorous; see section 3.2) in a humorous, often sarcastic way, thus giving rise to a *humorous metaphor*.[3] It is certainly not surprising that it is the metaphor that is mimicked in the memes; metaphor is the main persuasive strategy in the political ads, bearing a number of evaluative connotations, while at the same time, as a figurative phenomenon *par excellence*, it allows for creative exploitation and imaginative playfulness. The fact that such creative exploitation is associated with humor relates to the rhetorical goals of the producer, namely political critique.

Given that the original metaphor (i.e., the metaphor in the election campaign spot) may or may not be humorous, yet in the meme it is recast in humorous terms, I will refer to this phenomenon as *recycled humorous metaphors*. Such metaphors add to Attardo's (2015) existing typology of humorous metaphors (see section 2). This phenomenon is part and parcel of so-called ''vernacular creativity'' (Burgess 2007; cited in Milner, 2013b:2360), which is inherent to participatory media like YouTube videos and image memes, and affords creation, circulation, and transformation outside of traditional media gatekeepers. The present paper shows how social media recontextualize metaphors and *deliberately* render them humorous through the new genres they enact, namely internet memes. In light of this, I aim to suggest that this line of research can shed some new light on the rather fuzzy relationship between metaphor and humor (see section 2). Metaphor and humor have long been viewed as similar in conceptual terms in that they both bring together two different scenarios, their difference being that the former fully resolves the tension between them while the latter does so only partially. In the case of humorous metaphors, in particular, it has been suggested that the humorous effect arises from only partially resolving the metaphorical mapping (Oring, 2003; Attardo, 2015). In this paper, I wish to suggest instead that affinity between humor and metaphor lies at the pragmatic/discursive level and relates to their evaluative function in discourse; metaphor through the frames it evokes and their subsequent (positive or negative) associations, and humor through its targets and its function as a means of criticism. I will argue that in the memes metaphors become humorous by being recontextualized in an incongruent pragmatic scenario, whether they are creatively exploited or are retained intact. Such pragmatic incongruity arises from the interplay between the visual and the verbal component of the parody (on multimodal humor see Tsakona, 2009).

The structure of the paper is as follows: in section 2, I provide the reader with some background on the concepts that are central to the analysis: humor and metaphor. I particularly discuss the debate around humor and metaphor and show how humorous internet memes can enable a better understanding of the interconnections between the two phenomena. I also outline the theoretical background of the analysis and explain how the data under examination relate to the existing typology of humorous metaphors. The data analysis follows in section 3 and the paper concludes with a summary of the findings and some implications for further research in section 4.

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[2] On multimodal metaphors see, e.g., Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) and Pinar Sanz (2015).
[3] On humorous metaphors see Attardo (2015) and references therein, as well as the discussion in section 2.