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Master's Thesis

**THE LINGUISTIC DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL MEMES: HUMOUR AS A
TOOL FOR PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION
(BASED ON MODERN ENGLISH)**



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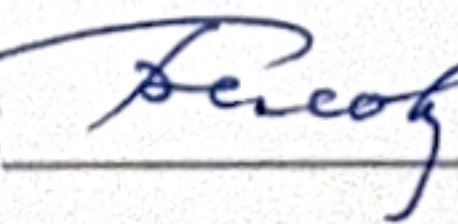
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ABSTRACT

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This Master's thesis examines the linguistic dynamics of political memes as a tool of influence in the modern digital environment. The relevance of the topic stems from the transformation of political discourse, where rational argumentation is giving way to emotionally charged multimodality. The object of the study is English-language political memes from 2016 to 2026, and the subject is the mechanisms of persuasion and linguistic manipulation realised through a system of intertextuality. The aim of the thesis is to deconstruct strategies of ideological influence in the English-language memetic space of recent years.

The scientific novelty lies in the development and testing of the author's synthetic analytical model, which adapts speech act theory to digital objects. The implementation of a three-level approach (locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary) has made it possible to identify the hidden pragmatic orientation of memes towards the delegitimisation of opponents. The combination of critical discourse analysis methods with visual semiotics facilitated the identification of ideological frames masked as humorous content.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusions and appendices. The theoretical section covers the evolution of memetics and the concept of precedent phenomena. The empirical data is based on a sample of 100 pieces of factual material collected from Reddit, X (Twitter) and Instagram, representing contemporary digital communication.

Based on the analysis, a typology of precedent references has been developed according to their source of origin: texts of mass culture, archetypal situations, symbolic figures and verbal codes. The main conclusions involve the identification of systematic cognitive simplification, whereby complex political phenomena are reduced to everyday scenarios. It has been established that humour in a political meme functions as a «rhetorical weapon», lowering the level of critical thinking and facilitating the internalisation of manipulative attitudes. It has been demonstrated that memes are a key factor in intensifying social polarisation through the construction of an «us versus them» opposition within digital communities. The findings have practical implications for political consultancy and the development of media literacy.

Keywords: *political meme, intertextuality, multimodality, linguistic manipulation, precedent phenomena, critical discourse analysis, digital communication, speech act theory.*

АНОТАЦІЯ

Сегеда Т. Лінгвістична динаміка політичних мемів: гумор як інструмент переконання та маніпуляції (на матеріалі сучасної англійської мови) : магістерська робота / Т. Сегеда ; наук. керівник І. Алексєєва. Київ : Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка, 2026. 162 с.

Магістерську роботу присвячено дослідженню лінгвістичної динаміки політичних мемів як інструменту впливу в сучасному цифровому середовищі. Актуальність теми зумовлена трансформацією політичного дискурсу, де раціональна аргументація поступається місцем емоційно насиченій мультимодальності. Об'єктом дослідження є англomовні політичні меми 2016–2026 років, а предметом – механізми переконання та лінгвістична маніпуляція, що реалізуються через систему інтертекстуальності. Метою роботи є деконструкція стратегій ідеологічного впливу в меметичному англomовному просторі останніх років.

Наукова новизна полягає в розробці та апробації авторської синтетичної моделі аналізу, яка адаптує теорію мовленнєвих актів до цифрових об'єктів. Впровадження трирівневого підходу (локутивність, ілокутивність, перлокутивність) дозволило виявити приховану прагматичну спрямованість мемів на делегітимізацію опонентів. Поєднання методів критичного дискурс-аналізу з візуальною семіотикою сприяло виявленню ідеологічних фреймів, які маскуються під гумористичний контент.

Робота складається зі вступу, трьох розділів, висновків та додатків. Теоретична частина охоплює еволюцію меметики та концепт прецедентних феноменів. Емпірична база ґрунтується на вибірці зі 100 одиниць фактичного матеріалу, який зібрано на платформах Reddit, X (Twitter) та Instagram, що представляють сучасну цифрову комунікацію.

За підсумками аналізу розроблено типологію прецедентних посилань за джерелом походження: тексти масової культури, архетипові ситуації, символічні постаті та вербальні коди. Основними висновками є виявлення системного когнітивного спрощення, за якого складні політичні явища редукуються до побутових сценаріїв. Встановлено, що гумор у політичному мемі функціонує як «риторична зброя», що знижує рівень критичного мислення та полегшує засвоєння маніпулятивних установок. Доведено, що меми є ключовим фактором посилення соціальної поляризації через конструювання опозиції «ми – вони» в межах цифрових спільнот. Результати мають практичне значення для політичного консалтингу та розвитку медіаграмотності.

Ключові слова: *політичний мем, інтертекстуальність, мультимодальність, лінгвістична маніпуляція, прецедентні феномени, критичний дискурс-аналіз, цифрова комунікація, теорія мовленнєвих актів.*

INTRODUCTION

In the current era of digital globalisation, the landscape of political communication has undergone a radical transformation. Traditional forms of political discourse are increasingly being supplanted or supplemented by digital artefacts of «participatory culture». The most striking manifestation of this is the internet meme. Political memes are no longer merely a form of entertainment. They have evolved into a complex «discursive weapon» capable of shaping public opinion, constructing group identities and mobilising political movements.

The relevance of this research stems from the dominance of emotional influence over rational argumentation in the contemporary political sphere. In the context of recent US political developments and the 2024 US election campaign, memes have become a primary tool of ideological influence. Their unique ability to condense complex socio-political issues into simplified visual-verbal «enthymemes» makes them ideal tools for persuasion and manipulation. Despite significant interest in digital culture, there is an urgent need for comprehensive linguistic and multimodal research that deconstructs the intertextual mechanisms and pragmatic strategies enabling memes to function as instruments of power and delegitimisation.

The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the linguistic and multimodal mechanisms of persuasion and manipulation in contemporary English-language political memes, specifically examining how intertextuality and humour contribute to ideological influence.

To achieve this aim, the following **tasks** were formulated:

1. To trace the evolution of the concept of the «meme» from biological metaphors to its status as a complex communicative genre in digital media studies;
2. To develop a theoretical synthesis of intertextuality, the theory of precedent phenomena and critical discourse analysis as a basis for the study of political memes;

3. To develop and justify an analytical model based on speech act theory (locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts) in order to systematically deconstruct memetic texts;
4. To create a typology of intertextual references (precedent texts, situations, figures and utterances) used in political discourse;
5. To analyse specific cases of viral political memes to identify strategies of framing, dehumanisation and «echoic mention»;
6. To synthesise cross-cutting patterns of persuasion and manipulation, such as cognitive simplification and the emotional substitution of the rational.

The object of the study is the English-language political meme as a multimodal intertextual text in digital discourse from 2016 to 2026.

The subject of the study is the linguistic and multimodal mechanisms (intertextuality, humour, rhetorical appeals) used in political memes to persuade and manipulate.

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining:

1. *Theoretical methods*: analysis and synthesis of academic literature in semiotics, linguistics and media studies; a comparative-historical method to trace the development of meme theory.
2. *Linguistic and empirical methods*: multimodal analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen) to examine the interaction of visual and verbal codes; semiotic analysis (Barthes) to distinguish between denotations and connotations; critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, van Dijk) to identify ideological structures; speech act theory (Austin, Searle) to determine pragmatic functions; a typological method for classifying precedent phenomena.
3. *Data collection methods*: monitoring of social media platforms (Reddit, X, Instagram) and archival verification via *Know Your Meme* and *Google Trends*.

The scientific novelty of the findings lies in the development of a synthetic research model that combines speech act theory with multimodal critical discourse

analysis. The study proposes a new classification of «memetic grammar» based on a synthesis of Ukrainian and Western traditions of studying precedence, and identifies a systemic shift. Intertextual recognisability serves as a tool for «cognitive simplification» in political manipulation.

The research findings can be utilised in higher education institutions when teaching courses in political linguistics, media literacy, critical discourse analysis and digital communications. The findings are also relevant for political analysts and communications experts engaged in monitoring digital discourse and countering manipulative content.

Part of the research findings was presented at the International Scientific and Practical Conference «Media expectations and media reality in the dimensions of hybrid warfare» (V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, 2026). The theoretical and practical findings are outlined in the publication: *Seheda T. S. Political Memes in Social Media : A Framework to Analyse Ideological Underpinnings. Mediaochikuvannia ta mediarealnist u vymirakh hibrydnoi viiny [Media expectations and media reality in the dimensions of hybrid warfare] : (Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference). Kharkiv : V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, 2026. [Seheda 2026].*

The Master's thesis consists of an abstract, an introduction, three chapters, sub-sections, conclusions for each chapter, general conclusions, a list of references and five appendices (A-E) containing the corpus of 100 analysed political memes.

The first chapter examines the theoretical foundations of memetics, intertextuality and the rhetoric of humour. The second chapter justifies the methodology, describes the experimental research base (100 memes) and demonstrates the analytical model's operation on five case studies. The third chapter presents a typology of intertextual references and synthesises the systemic patterns of persuasion and manipulation identified in the sample.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF THE LINGUISTIC DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL MEMES

1.1. The Meme as an Object of Scientific Research

The concept of the «meme» has a relatively short but extremely rich scientific history. Its introduction into scientific discourse is associated with the name of the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In his influential work «The Selfish Gene», he proposed the term to denote a unit of cultural information that spreads from person to person by analogy with a biological gene [Dawkins 2006, p. 192]. Dawkins defined a meme as any idea, behaviour or style that replicates within a culture, ranging from melodies and fashion trends to religious concepts and scientific theories. According to Dawkins, the key properties of a meme are «longevity», «fecundity» and «copy-fidelity». Dawkins emphasised the etymological link of the term to the Greek root «mimeme» (that which is imitated), yet deliberately shortened it to the monosyllabic word «meme» so that it would phonetically resonate with the biological term «gene» [ibid., p. 194]. This linguistic choice cemented the cognitive analogy between genetic and cultural evolution.

This biological metaphor proved extremely productive, though it sparked significant scientific debate. Susan Blackmore developed Dawkins' theory in her work «The Meme Machine». She proposed viewing the human brain as a «memetic engine», that is, a mechanism that evolved specifically for the selection and dissemination of the most successful memes [Blackmore 2000, p. 17]. Blackmore insisted that memes are independent replicators that use humans as carriers, rather than the other way around. She argues that a meme's success does not depend on its truth or usefulness. A meme may be «positively harmful» (for example, false doctrines), yet it will still spread if it has a high replicative capacity [ibid., p. 5]. This explains the mechanism of memetic manipulation: virality takes precedence over rationality.

Blackmore's radical position has faced criticism from cognitive scientists, notably Dan Sperber. He argued that cultural transmission is a fundamentally transformative process. Every reproduction of an idea is a reinterpretation of it [Sperber 2000, p. 163]. Sperber notes that when acquiring language, a child copies phrases and infers grammatical rules. Thus, the similarity between the speech of different people is due to shared «evolved dispositions» and mechanisms of understanding [ibid., p. 172]. Denisova, however, takes this critique further. She emphasises that the Darwinian approach is of little help in analysing internet memes, as they are not merely units of information, but texts inextricably linked to the rhythms of social media and the ways in which society reflects upon itself [Denisova 2019, p. 18]. For research, this means that the dynamics of political memes are determined by virality and by how the audience reconstructs their meanings.

The shift towards a media studies perspective is linked to the development of the internet. Patrick Davison defined an internet meme as «a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission» [Davison 2012, p. 122]. He emphasised that an internet meme is fundamentally «malleable», «replicable» and easily susceptible to manipulation [ibid., p. 123]. Central to this is the ability to remix whilst preserving «the ideal», that is, the concept that is transmitted even when it's «the manifestation» that changes [ibid., p. 123]. J. Assmann's socio-constructivist approach allows us to view this process as a tool for sustaining collective identity. Memetic communication becomes a form of «cultural memory», where meaning is determined by the text's ability to fit into the universal «culture of memory» of a particular community [Assmann 2011, pp. 16, 33].

Contemporary researchers B. Wiggins & G. Bowers propose viewing internet memes as «remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation». They define the meme as a distinct communicative genre [Wiggins, Bowers 2014, pp. 1, 11]. B. Wiggins emphasises a paradigm shift. An internet meme is an «enthymeme»,

which requires the audience to «fill in the blanks» in meaning themselves, making it a powerful tool for visual arguments [Wiggins 2019, pp. 18–19].

The most systematic study was conducted by Limor Shifman. She defined an internet meme as «a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance», which «were created with awareness of each other», and «were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.» [Shifman 2014, p. 41]. Her three-dimensional model (content, form, stance) allows us to track how the format conveys different meanings depending on the context. Shifman also distinguishes between «viral content» and the «meme» itself as a «collection of texts» and a series of transformations [ibid., p. 56]. This distinction is complemented by V. Rizun's concept of «massification» [Rizun 2008, pp. 76–77]. The researcher views mass communication as a means of creating a mass subject by connecting the individual to the mass consciousness. He transforms memes into instruments of social regulation [Rizun 2008, pp. 61, 77].

Linguistic and multimodal perspectives view memes as fully-fledged objects of analysis. D. Barton and K. Lee have studied them as a new type of «textual practice» that combines «images and other visual resources with the written word online.» [Barton, Lee 2013, p. 5]. P. Ledin and D. Machin clarify that memes consist of «semiotic materials», the materiality and design of which directly influence the perception of the message [Ledin, Machin 2018, p. 11]. The pragmatic mechanisms of memetic humour were investigated by M. Dynel. She conceptualised them as «visual-verbal jokes» functioning according to the «incongruity-resolution» model [Dynel 2016, pp. 661–663]. Thus, the meme has evolved from a biological unit of mimicry into a complex multimodal genre of political discourse.

1.2. Intertextuality as a Theoretical Basis for the Analysis of Memes

The central theoretical concept for analysing the mechanisms of persuasion in political memes is intertextuality. Although this term is now commonly used in the

humanities, its conceptual development has a complex and controversial history, which directly influences its application to memetic texts.

Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of intertextuality into academic discourse in the 1960s because for her it «replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.» [Kristeva 1980, p. 66]. She reinterpreted Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the dialogism and polyphony of text. In her seminal article «Word, Dialogue, and Novel», she argued that any text is a «mosaic of quotations» and an «absorption and transformation of another» [ibid., p. 80]. This means that a text is not an autonomous unit of meaning, but is always embedded in a network of relationships with other texts, from which it borrows meaning, structure and connotations.

Within the Ukrainian linguistic tradition, O. Selivanova supports this approach. The researcher defines intertextuality as the «presence of 'traces of other texts'» within a specific text, or more broadly, as a «dialogic connection» of the text in the semiotic universe with previous texts (recursive) and subsequent text creation (procursive)» [Selivanova 2010, p. 217]. Kristeva insisted that intertextuality is an ontological characteristic of any text. It cannot exist as a carrier of meaning outside of intertextual relationships.

Roland Barthes developed these ideas in his theory of the text in his essay «The Death of the Author». He argues that a text is a «multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.» [Barthes 1977b, p. 146]. For Barthes, it is the reader who is the subject in whom the meaning of the text is constituted during the process of reception through the activation of their own intertextual knowledge [ibid., p. 148]. This view is particularly relevant to political memes. Without the audience's cultural knowledge, a meme remains a meaningless collection of images and words.

Gérard Genette systematised the concept of intertextuality in his monograph «Palimpsests». The scholar proposed a precise taxonomy of intertextual relations [Genette 1997, pp. 1–5]. Hypertextuality, the transformation of one text into another

through remixing, is particularly important for the analysis of memes. N. Fairclough specifies this process as «recontextualisation», which is «a movement from one context to another, entailing particular transformations». [Fairclough 2003, p. 51]. This allows the author to «frame» borrowed voices and create a hierarchy between their own message and the cited source [ibid., p. 53].

Within the framework of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough distinguishes between «manifest intertextuality» (the direct inclusion of texts) and «constitutive intertextuality» or «interdiscursivity» [Fairclough 1992, pp. 104, 117]. For him, intertextuality is a social practice. Texts circulate through «intertextual chains» [ibid., p. 130], and the selection of resources is an ideologically charged act within the framework of «hegemonic struggle» [ibid., p. 103]. This perspective allows us to analyse which power relations are reproduced or challenged by the choice of a particular memetic template.

The application of intertextuality theory to internet memes is a relatively new field. Limor Shifman defines intertextuality as a fundamental attribute of memes, which operate through mechanisms of «partial quotation», transformation and remixing of previous sources [Shifman 2014, pp. 2, 19–22, 49]. T. Highfield emphasises that it is precisely intertextuality that makes political memes appealing, as they allow politics to be commented on through recognisable pop-culture images and create a link between the user's personal experience and the global political context [Highfield 2016, p. 143].

Nicholas John explores the mechanism of circulation of these texts through the concept of «sharing» as the fundamental logic of the Web 2.0 era. The sharing of digital objects uniquely combines the distribution of information («distributive sharing») with interpersonal communication («communicative sharing»). Content becomes an expression of the user's emotions and identity [John 2016, p. 120]. Thus, intertextuality in memes transforms into a dynamic process of collective meaning-making.

1.3. The Theory of Precedent Phenomena and Memetic Grammar

In this study, «precedent phenomena» refers to a set of culturally significant units (texts, situations, images and utterances). They have acquired the status of shared cultural knowledge within a particular linguistic community and can be activated in a new context by a mere hint or allusion. This concept is a concretisation of the broader concept of intertextuality with regard to those elements that are most culturally productive and most frequently reproduced in new texts. This concept is deliberately situated within the framework of the internationally recognised theory of intertextuality, drawing on the works of J. Kristeva, R. Barthes and J. Genette, which allows us to avoid dependence on a single academic tradition.

Within the Ukrainian linguistic school, O. Selivanova notes that precedent phenomena form part of the «basic core of stereotypical knowledge» of a particular ethnocultural community. These are components of knowledge whose denotation and content are widely known, enabling them to serve as a relevant resource in cognitive and communicative terms [Selivanova 2010, p. 293] (here and hereafter the translation is ours – T. S.). Limor Shifman identified three dimensions through which memes inherit and transform such source cultural artefacts: content (what «refers to both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by the text»), form («the physical incarnation») and stance («the ways in which addressers position themselves») [Shifman 2014, pp. 40–41].

Precedent texts are the most extensively studied type of precedent phenomena. In this case, the memetic format takes the form of a literal dialogue between the new text and its source. The meaning of the new text is constituted through references to the prototext. An important tool for understanding how shared cultural artefacts function is Anna Wierzbicka's concept of «cultural scripts». She defines them as a method whereby different «communicative styles can be clarified» and cultural

norms explicated through a «natural semantic metalanguage» based on universal primitives [Wierzbicka 1991, pp. 21, 35].

If we extrapolate this concept to digital culture, memetic formats can be viewed as a kind of cultural script in a condensed visual form. F. Yus supplements this with the concept of «make-sense frames» as «stereotypical ways of building up scenarios for the comprehension of humorous discourses» [Yus 2016, p. 84]. David Machin develops the ideas of Van Leeuwen and R. Wodak and uses the term «scripts» to describe «the vision of what sequence of behaviour is associated with a particular discourse». This allows memes to be analysed as tools that, through processes of «abstraction, addition, substitution, and deletion» of elements, transform complex social practices into recognisable visual patterns [Machin 2013, p. 352].

An important aspect of how memes function is their ability to reproduce deep narrative structures. Claude Bremond demonstrated that the structure of any narrative is based on a fundamental «agencement de rôles» (arrangement of roles) [Bremond 1973, p. 133]. The rules governing their combination are capable of generating «an infinite number of possible stories» [Cerquiglini 1974, p. 759]. This idea resonates with Jung's concept of «archetypes», universal symbolic patterns of the collective unconscious [Jung 1969, p. 4]. In the context of memetic communication, precedent situations (love triangles, dilemmas of choice) function as archetypal narrative schemes that activate deep emotional resonances. In his study of the «monomyth», Joseph Campbell demonstrated that certain narrative patterns are cross-cultural and exert a powerful influence precisely because of their archetypal nature [Campbell 2004, p. 28].

Iconic figures have been studied within the framework of Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory as a system for preserving collectively significant images. Such figures are «figures of memory» [Assmann, Czaplicka 1995, p. 129] that comprise that body of «reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch» [ibid., p. 132]. Roland Barthes described a similar mechanism

in his theory of myth. Myth naturalises the ideological and presents a constructed meaning as natural [Barthes 1957, pp. 179, 215]. Precedent figures in memes function as Barthes's «second-order semiological system». They borrow connotations from cultural tradition.

Precedent utterances are analysed through speech act theory. D. Wilson and D. Sperber argued that ironic utterances are instances of «echoic mention», where the speaker expresses their attitude towards the content and creates a pragmatic distance [Sperber, Wilson 1981, pp. 307–316]. Michael Polanyi developed the concept of «tacit knowing» [Polanyi 1966, p. 1]. The scholar argued that «we can know more than we can tell» [ibid., p. 4]. Viral phrases («Person. Woman. Man...» [102]) function as a form of such knowledge. Understanding a meme becomes an act of «indwelling» in a shared culture [ibid., p. 16]. In Ukrainian media discourse, O. Polumysna defines precedent utterances as «self-sufficient units» whose semantics are «broader than the simple sum of meanings», allowing political events to be situated within a widely recognised context [Polumysna 2016, pp. 16–17] (here and hereafter the translation is ours – T. S.). E. D. Hirsch justifies this through the concept of «cultural literacy» as the possession of a community's «shared information» [Hirsch 1987, pp. 2, 19].

The set of stable memetic formats constitutes what is called «memetic grammar», a system of visual and narrative syntaxes. Memetic formats function as genres: «socially recognised types of communicative action» with shared structures [Shifman 2014, p. 110]. These are «productive texts», where gaps «invite users to fill in their own meanings» [ibid., p. 99].

This logic corresponds to F. de Saussure's dichotomy. Memetic grammar emerges as *langue*, the social «contract signed by the members of a community», whilst specific memes act as an «individual act» (*parole*) [Saussure 1959, pp. 14, 19, 122]. In his theory of structuration, Anthony Giddens demonstrated that social structures are «constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them»

[Giddens 1984, p. 25]. Memetic grammar is a structure that meme creators reproduce and transform, thereby generating the linguistic dynamics that form the subject of this study.

1.4. Theories of Humour and Their Application to Memetic Communication

Humour is a central mechanism of persuasion in political memes. Understanding exactly how humour performs its rhetorical function requires reference to classical and contemporary theories, each of which illuminates different aspects of this phenomenon. One of the oldest and most influential is the theory of superiority, which has its origins in ancient philosophy and was classically formulated in Thomas Hobbes's «Leviathan». Hobbes argued that laughter is an expression of «sudden glory», that is, a sense of superiority over others or over one's own previous weaknesses [Hobbes 2017, p. 36]. This theory remains highly relevant for the analysis of political humour. Mocking political opponents through memes is a direct realisation of Hobbes's mechanism. As John Morreall notes, the theory of superiority takes on particular significance precisely in satirical discourse. Socially significant figures become the objects of ridicule, and «laughter, while based on superiority, serves as a social corrective» [Morreall 2009, p. 11].

V. Rizun supplements this perspective through the lens of mass communication theory. The researcher identifies three main forms of influence: contagion (the transmission of emotional states), suggestion (the instilling of attitudes) and manipulation (covert control) [Rizun 2008, pp. 145–151] (here and hereafter the translation is ours – T. S.). He notes that the success of such influence depends directly on trust in the communicator, and in memetic communication, humour becomes a point of «emotional contagion». It lowers the individual's level of rational reflection and facilitates the assimilation of ideological content [ibid., p. 153].

I. Kant and A. Schopenhauer developed the theory of incongruity. It views humour as a reaction to the incongruity between expectation and reality. Kant described the comic as an «affect» that arises when «tense expectation» is suddenly «transformed into nothing» [Kant 2007, p. 332]. Schopenhauer elaborated on this idea. He argued that humour arises from the incongruity between a «concept» and «real objects» [Schopenhauer 1969, p. 59]. In the context of memetic communication, this theory is particularly fruitful. Most formats are built on the principle of unexpectedly juxtaposing serious political content with a light-hearted media format. G. Kuipers emphasises that such humorous texts are created «in the immediate wake» of the news. They only make sense within a highly specific context, when grounded in deep-seated cultural matrices. This allows us to view political memes as a form of «sociology of the joke», where the ironic framing of events facilitates a collective processing of significant social transformations [Kuipers 2015, pp. 9–10].

The theory of release is associated with S. Freud. It views humour as a mechanism for «relief from psychical expenditure» [Freud 2002, p. 107]. Freud demonstrated that jokes «circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible» [ibid., p. 86]. This explains the ability of memes to convey harsh criticism of authority in a form that can be dismissed as «just a joke». A modern version of this idea was developed by P. McGraw and K. Warren in the concept of «benign violation». Humour arises when something is simultaneously a breach of the norm and entirely acceptable [McGraw, Warren 2010, p. 1143]. P. McGraw and J. Warner note that this model is used in the digital content industry to predict virality. It allows one to identify the moment of a «safe» breach of social expectations. At the same time, they cite the criticism of linguist V. Raskin, who considers this approach to be more of a vague metaphor than a functional formula [McGraw, Warner 2014, p. 24].

S. Attardo's cognitive theory of humour (General Theory of Verbal Humour) identifies six parameters for describing such texts: script opposition, logical

mechanism, target, narrative strategy, language and situation [Attardo 1994, pp. 220–226]. This model allows for a systematic description of humorous mechanisms in memes. The foundation for understanding irony was laid by D. Sperber and D. Wilson's theory of «echoic mention». They argue that the ironist does not simply use a word, but «mentions» a particular idea or norm in order to demonstrate its «ludicrous inappropriateness» [Sperber, Wilson 1981, pp. 303, 310]. The authors later expanded this to «echoic interpretation». Now, irony is a means of expressing the speaker's «dissociated attitude», ranging from scepticism to ridicule [Sperber, Wilson 1995, pp. 238–239]. It is precisely this mechanism of «echoic utterance» that explains the role of irony in memetic communication (for example, in the «Dark Brandon» [87] memes), where the reuse of cultural codes serves to express an ironic attitude towards them.

1.5. The Rhetoric of Persuasion: From Aristotle to the Digital Age

The question of how language and imagery persuade is as old as rhetoric itself. Aristotle's classical triad of persuasion – logos, pathos and ethos – remains fundamental to the analysis of communication [Aristotle 2007, pp. 53–54]. This triad reveals a fundamental asymmetry when applied to contemporary political memes. In classical oratory, these appeals must be in balance, whereas in the memetic space, there is a hypertrophy of pathos (emotional impact) alongside an almost complete absence of logos (rational argumentation). Ethos is transformed. It functions as a tool for discrediting an opponent or a means of constructing a «us versus them» group identity.

Central to understanding persuasion in memes is Aristotle's concept of «enthymeme», a rhetorical syllogism built on a minimal number of premises, as the audience fills in the rest for themselves [Aristotle 2007, p. 56]. J. Bogost adapts this idea to digital media. He argues that the user becomes an active participant in the persuasion process when they «fill in the missing proposition and complete the

claim» [Bogost 2007, p. 43]. In the context of memes, the viewer «completes» the argument by relying on the rules of the memetic template. This makes the conclusion subjectively «their own» and more convincing [ibid., p. 43].

From a cognitive perspective, this functions as a means of saving effort. A meme provides a visual or textual cue (stimulus) that instantly activates a specific «encyclopaedic entry», shared cultural context or ideological stance in the viewer's memory [Sperber, Wilson 1995, pp. 87–88]. The viewer's independent drawing of conclusions creates an effect of intellectual engagement. This makes the meme's hidden ideological message more persuasive. A. Denisova suggests viewing such memes as «symbolic rhetorical arguments» and «discursive weapons» in the struggle for power, whose strength lies in their ability to condense complex socio-political issues into «ready-made interpretations» [Denisova 2019, p. 19].

F. Heylighen links the effectiveness of such argumentation to the «subjective criteria» for a meme's success. The key factors are «simplicity» and «coherence», the ability of a new idea to «fit in» with the memory that is already there [Heylighen 1999, p. 4]. These properties minimise the cognitive effort required for decoding, making the structure of the meme attractive for rapid assimilation. In his concept of framing, George Lakoff notes that «Every word, like elephant, evokes a frame» in the mind, which determines our view of the world [Lakoff 2004, p. 3]. According to Lakoff, successful persuasion lies in reframing, in using language that activates the recipient's own value system and forces facts to «fit» into their worldview [ibid., p. 17].

G. Lakoff and M. Johnson have demonstrated that the fundamental mechanism of such structuring is the conceptual metaphor. Complex abstract concepts are comprehended through our experience of interacting with concrete objects [Lakoff, Johnson 2003, p. 5]. Metaphor allows us to focus on certain aspects of reality whilst concealing others. This makes memetic communication a powerful tool of ideological influence [ibid., p. 10]. S. Forceville expands on this idea and notes that multimodal

metaphors in media texts often possess «greater cross-cultural access», as the «pictorial and multimodal source domains» are more easily deciphered by members of different cultures than «language codes» [Forceville 2008, pp. 465, 480].

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by R. Petty and J. Cacioppo, belief in memes occurs predominantly via the «peripheral route», as they utilise «affective cues» and familiar images, which are most effective in conditions of «low motivation or ability to process» [Petty, Cacioppo 1986, pp. 10–12]. E. Pariser links the current stage of this evolution to «persuasion profiling», the ability of algorithms to determine which specific styles of rhetorical arguments are most effective for a particular individual [Pariser 2011, pp. 37, 47]. This signifies a shift from mass influence to micro-targeted manipulation, where the visual image of a meme is adapted to the user's individual psychology.

1.6. Critical Discourse Analysis and the Mechanisms of Ideological Influence in Memes

Norman Fairclough offers a critical conception of ideology as «meaning in the service of power», which contributes to the establishment and maintenance of relations of domination [Fairclough 2003, p. 9]. Ideology in texts is «enacted» through genres and «inculcated» through styles [ibid., p. 15]. For a productive study of memes, there is a three-dimensional model of discourse developed by N. Fairclough. It distinguishes between «(i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice» [Fairclough 1995, pp. 97–98]. This allows memes to be considered simultaneously as texts with specific structural properties, as practices with specific conditions of production (virality on social media) and as social practices with pronounced ideological effects.

Ruth Wodak supplements this framework with a discourse-historical approach (DHA). It pays particular attention to four levels of context, from the immediate

situational to the broader socio-political background [Reisigl, Wodak 2009, p. 90]. Through the mechanism of recontextualisation, this approach explains how a memetic text acquires new meanings in interaction with different contexts. It emphasises that the content of a meme is shaped in the course of its historical existence.

Teun van Dijk developed a sociocognitive approach to CDA, central to which is the concept of the «ideological square». This is a strategy of «emphasizing Our good things», «their bad things», «mitigating our bad things» and «their good things» [van Dijk 2015, p. 474]. This strategy is fundamental to most political memes, where «our» camp is presented as competent, and «theirs» as dangerous or absurd. T. van Dijk also links social power to «privileged access to valued social resources» [van Dijk 1996, p. 85]. He notes that control over the means of communication allows one to influence the attitudes of the audience. In this context, memes act as a tool for «democratising access», as they allow counter-elites to challenge the traditional media's monopoly on shaping public opinion [ibid., pp. 86, 90].

E. Laclau and C. Mouffe substantiate the operation of the «logic of equivalence», which simplifies the political space by creating «chains of equivalence». They divide society into two antagonistic camps [Laclau, Mouffe 2001, pp. 125, 127–129]. Political memes visually reinforce this «Us–Them» division, where the presence of «the Other» is interpreted as a threat to the group's identity. W. Phillips and R. Millner propose assessing this memetic antagonism through the direction of the critical attack. «Punching down» refers to the mockery of marginalised groups, whilst «punching up» refers to the challenge of hierarchies. This allows us to determine whether a meme functions as a means of «speaking truth to power» and emancipation, or whether it reinforces «challenging structural inequality» [Phillips, Milner 2017, p. 14].

In his encoding/decoding model, Stuart Hall describes communication as a process in which each stage is «relatively autonomous» [Hall 1980, pp. 128–130]. He identifies three positions of decoding: «dominant-hegemonic», «negotiated» and «oppositional» [ibid., pp. 136–138]. This explains the «polysemy» of memes, that is, the ability of a single sign to be interpreted in conflicting ways depending on the ideological context of the audience. Finally, M. Khosravi-Nik notes that digital platforms are becoming a «vehicle for capitalist hegemony», where elites use memes to «semiotise» social problems (such as migration). They mask the structural shortcomings of the neoliberal order through simplified ideological frames [KhosraviNik 2017, pp. 54, 58].

1.7. Multimodality and the Semiotics of Digital Texts

Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress developed the «Grammar of Visual Design». This is a systematic theory of meaning in images and other visual artefacts [Kress, van Leeuwen 2006]. They proposed viewing visual elements as signs that perform three types of functions simultaneously: representational, interactional and compositional. This lays the foundation for understanding a meme as a complex semiotic object, where every detail of the design contributes to the creation of meaning.

Fundamental to the analysis of memes is Roland Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation [Barthes 1967]. Memetic communication takes place predominantly at the level of connotations, where visual signs activate entire complexes of cultural meanings. In his work «Rhetoric of the Image», R. Barthes proposed the concepts of «anchorage» and «relay» to describe the relationship between image and text [Barthes 1977a, p. 38]. A specific type of «anchorage» is particularly prevalent in contemporary memes. Since the image is «polysemous», the text radically fixes the «floating chain of signifieds» and imposes a specific

interpretation on the viewer. It effectively recodes the visual content [ibid., pp. 39–40].

Charles Forceville extends cognitive metaphor theory to the visual sphere. The researcher identifies four types of pictorial metaphors (contextual, hybrid, integrated and pictorial simile). This allows for a description of the mechanism of «merging» objects in memes [Forceville 2008, pp. 467–469]. The author emphasises the «perceptual immediacy» of multimodal metaphors, which, due to the specificity of the visual domain, have a more powerful emotional impact on the audience than their verbal counterparts [Forceville 2008, p. 465].

David Machin notes that various semiotic resources (images, colour, font) possess specific «affordances» [Machin 2013, p. 349]. These allow meme creators to avoid direct verbal assertions. Instead, they impose ideological frames through visual imagery. This approach gives rise to a particular type of «epistemological commitment», where the visual image does not require a clear definition of logical connections (for example, through verbs). This makes the message appear more natural and difficult to refute [ibid., p. 350]. Ledin & Machin supplement this with the concept of «canons of use», historically accepted patterns of using semiotic materials. They make ideological choices appear «natural» to society [Ledin, Machin 2018, pp. 52–53]. In political memes, such canons legitimise the message through a structure familiar to the audience.

The cognitive aspect of multimodal perception is explored by F. Yus. The researcher explains the mechanism of humour as a combination of processing a visual element that alters the normal process of text interpretation. This leads to a «stop-to-think strategy», which is key to persuasion. It forces the viewer to consider several versions of meaning simultaneously [Yus 2016, p. 16].

Finally, Knobel and Lankshear identify three fundamental patterns that ensure the «fecundity» of a multimodal meme: «some element of humour», «a rich kind of intertextuality» and «anomalous juxtaposition» [Knobel, Lankshear 2007, pp. 209,

215]. It is precisely the unexpected combination of incongruous visual elements that creates «cognitive hooks», compelling the audience to engage in the process of deciphering and subsequently disseminating memetic content.

1.8. The Theory of Speech Acts and the Pragmatics of Memetic Communication

John Austin laid the foundations of speech act theory in his work «How to Do Things with Words». He distinguished three senses of the speech act: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary [Austin 1962, p. 108]. John Searle systematised this theory. The scholar proposed a formal model of illocutionary acts $F(p)$, where F denotes «illocutionary force» and p denotes «propositional content» [Searle 1969, p. 31]. This theory allows memes to be described as complex pragmatic constructions. Most political memes are representational in form (statements about the state of affairs), yet in terms of their illocutionary purpose, they perform acts of appeal, mobilisation or delegitimisation of opponents. As A. Zagnitko emphasises, the «illocutionary function» in the text acts as a means by which «previously perceived fragments are reinterpreted». They exert an implicit influence on the addressee's worldview [Zagnitko 2007, pp. 77, 99] (here and hereafter the translation is ours – T. S.).

H. P. Grice developed the theory of communicative cooperation and the concept of «implicature», which is extremely productive for the analysis of ironic memes [Grice 1975, pp. 43–45]. Irony in memetic discourse functions through the «flouting» of the maxims of quality. This signals to the audience the need to look for a «contradictory proposition» [ibid., p. 53]. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson developed Grice's programme into the theory of relevance. They described communication as the search for an optimal balance between «processing effort» and «contextual effects» [Sperber, Wilson 1995, p. 123]. Within memetic pragmatics, a

successful act is one that activates the maximum amount of contextual knowledge whilst requiring minimal effort from the viewer to decipher it.

R. Cialdini points to the «rejection-then-retreat» strategy, which, through a mechanism of mutual concessions, compels the recipient to feel an obligation towards the speaker [Cialdini 2001, p. 4]. In memetic communication, this manifests itself through the «soft» ironic framing of radical political demands. Irony reduces the audience's cognitive resistance and facilitates the acceptance of manipulative content without a sense of external pressure. M. Zappavigna regards memetic phrases and hashtags as specific «metacomments». They function similarly to «aside» remarks in theatrical discourse and increase the «semiotic loudness» of a political message [Zappavigna 2013, pp. 10–11]. Thanks to the mechanism of «searchable talk», such markers make ideological messages «bondable». They transform private thought into a collective affective experience [ibid., p. 16].

According to Bennett and Segerberg, in contemporary co-action, «organising agents» (platforms and algorithms) become the «organizational form of the political action». They alter the dynamics of collective expression [Bennett, Segerberg 2012, pp. 745, 752]. This transforms memetic communication into a process of «co-production and co-distribution» [ibid., p. 752]. The pragmatic goal shifts from the transmission of a message to the creation of «recombinant networks» structures [ibid., p. 753]. Thus, the pragmatics of memes goes beyond the scope of a single act and becomes a mechanism of networked political mobilisation.

1.9. Political Memes in the Context of Digital Culture

In his concept of «convergent culture», Henry Jenkins described the transition from passive consumption of media content to active participation in its production and transformation [Jenkins 2006, p. 3]. He introduced the concept of «participatory culture», an environment where barriers to self-expression are low, and internet memes become its quintessence. E. D. Hirsch emphasises that «shared heritage»

(dates, figures, quotations) acts as the «glue» that ensures community cohesion and the possibility of national dialogue [Hirsch 1987, p. 150]. In the digital age, this role is fulfilled by memes, which have become the modern equivalent of Hirsch's list of «what everyone should know». They shape a new digital literacy, which is essential for participation in political life [ibid., pp. 53, 130].

Knobel & Lankshear view the creation of memes as a form of «new literacy» realised in «affinity spaces» [Knobel, Lankshear 2007, p. 207]. These are online communities united by shared interests. An important aspect of political struggle in these spaces is «counter-meming» or «memetic engineering». This involves the deliberate creation of memes to «deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas» [ibid., pp. 223–224]. T. Highfield views memes as «political rituals of social media» that allow «multiple parallel narratives» to coexist. Ordinary users gain the potential to shape the political agenda [Highfield 2016, pp. 143–144].

Whitney Phillips has explored the origins of internet culture in the practices of «subcultural trolling». She has shown that contemporary memetic culture is inseparable from marginalised online communities, where norms of communication are systematically violated [Phillips 2015, p. 21]. This explains the often aggressive and provocative nature of memetic humour. Ryan Milner proposed the concept of «memetic logics» to describe a specific type of argumentation through images. It relies on shared codes rather than rational evidence [Milner 2016, pp. 14, 48]. A. Nissenbaum and L. Shifman suggest viewing memes as «contested social capital», where meme literacy becomes a tool for social differentiation and «gatekeeping practices» [Nissenbaum, Shifman 2017, p. 484]. In this context, memes function as «discursive weapons», allowing the boundaries of a community to be marked by mocking «outsiders» [ibid., p. 495].

Cass Sunstein links the technological dimension of this culture to the formation of «echo chambers» or «information cocoons». These are environments where users

encounter only content that confirms their views [Sunstein 2017, pp. 9, 13]. Eli Pariser supplements this with the concept of the «filter bubble». He describes it as a «unique universe of information for each of us» that leads to «informational determinism» and the «fragmentation with respect to topics and points of view» [Pariser 2011, pp. 8–10]. M. Khosravi-Nik emphasises that echo chambers are «natural consequences of the way Social Media are commercially designed» [KhosraviNik 2017, p. 64]. Their architecture encourages the reinforcement of beliefs without critical analysis. This gives rise to the principle that «visibility equals legitimacy», whereby the popularity of a meme online is automatically perceived as proof of its social credibility [ibid., p. 66].

1.10. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Research

Based on a review of the academic literature, the author's research model was formulated. It synthesises the theoretical approaches discussed into a coherent framework for the analysis of political memes:

Political memes are regarded as multimodal intertextual texts operating at the intersection of linguistics, semiotics and social pragmatics [Barthes 1967; Kress, van Leeuwen 2006]. The meaning of a meme is not reducible to the sum of its parts, but arises at the point of interaction between visual and verbal codes.

Intertextuality is regarded as a constitutive condition of memetic communication in general. A meme cannot exist as a carrier of meaning outside intertextual relations. It is a «mosaic of quotations» that activates the audience's background knowledge through precedent phenomena [Kristeva 1980, p. 66].

Humour is regarded as the central rhetorical mechanism of memetic communication. The enthymematic structure of memetic humour (where the conclusion is inferred by the viewer) is more persuasive than direct argumentation [Aristotle 2007, p. 52]. According to the model by R. Petty and J. Cacioppo [Petty, Cacioppo 1986, p. 15], this peripheral route of persuasion is particularly effective in

digital environments with a «low elaboration likelihood», where «emotional states» prevail over rational analysis.

The ideological dimension of memes is examined within the framework of critical discourse analysis [Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2015], that is, as a system of discursive strategies that reproduce and challenge power relations and construct group identities. J. Charteris-Black's concept of «rhetorical potential» is based on the meme author's ability to synthesise cognitive metaphors with the cultural values of the audience. This allows memes to be viewed as means of constructing social reality, where metaphor serves as a bridge between individual perception and collective ideology [Charteris-Black 2011, p. 13].

The polysemy of memes is emphasised, as this is their fundamental characteristic. According to S. Hall [Hall 1980, p. 136], the meaning of a memetic text is constituted during the process of decoding. Therefore, the same meme can be interpreted in fundamentally different (even conflictual) ways by different audiences depending on their position.

P. Chilton's model of «deictic space» is taken into account, which explains political conviction through the positioning of objects on the axes of space, time and modality. A meme functions as a means of «proximising» distant events to the «deictic centre (the Self, that is, I or we)» [Chilton 2004, p. 58]. Everything close to the centre is automatically marked as «epistemic true» and «deontic right». The opponent is deliberately shifted into the zone of the «other», the «wrong» and the «distant» [ibid., pp. 59–60]. The proposed synthetic model allows for a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic dynamics of political memes and covers the levels of their structure, pragmatics and social functioning.

Conclusions to Chapter 1

The first chapter presents a systematic review of the academic literature, covering six interrelated theoretical traditions: the theory of memes and digital culture, the theory of intertextuality, the concept of precedent phenomena and memetic grammar, theories of humour, the rhetoric of persuasion, critical discourse analysis and multimodal semiotics.

The analysis showed that the study of memes has evolved from the biological metaphor of R. Dawkins and S. Blackmore to a fully-fledged interdisciplinary field of digital media studies (L. Shifman, P. Davison, A. Denisova). It has been established that the modern internet meme is not merely an object of imitation, but a complex communicative genre (B. Wiggins, G. Bowers) and an instrument of the «massification» of society (V. Rizun). The theory of intertextuality by J. Kristeva and R. Barthes, systematised by J. Genette and N. Fairclough, combined with the ideas of T. Highfield and N. John, provides the most productive framework for analysing memes as «mosaics of quotations» existing within online dissemination networks.

The concept of precedent phenomena has been thoroughly developed in Ukrainian linguistics (O. Selivanova, A. Zagnitko). It allows for the systematic classification of types of cultural references in memes (texts, situations, figures of speech, utterances). It is logically complemented by Western cognitive theories of «cultural scripts» (A. Wierzbicka), «frames of reference» (F. Yus), «cultural literacy» (E. D. Hirsch) and «tacit knowledge» (M. Polanyi). This has made it possible to describe «memetic grammar» as a system of stable formats based on «memory traces» (A. Giddens) and archetypal structures (C. Bremond, C. Jung, J. Campbell).

Classical theories of humour (T. Hobbes, I. Kant, A. Schopenhauer, S. Freud), combined with Aristotle's concept of enthymeme and the theory of relevance (D. Sperber, D. Wilson), explain the effectiveness of humour as a tool of persuasion. It has been established that memetic humour operates through the mechanisms of «benign violation» (P. McGraw), «echoic mention» and «emotional contagion». This

reduces the audience's cognitive resistance. The rhetorical potential of memes is explored through the concepts of framing (G. Lakoff), conceptual metaphor (M. Johnson, C. Forceville), procedural rhetoric (I. Bogost) and the peripheral route of persuasion (R. Petty, J. Cacioppo).

Multimodal semiotics (G. Kress, T. van Leeuwen, R. Barthes, D. Machin) provides tools for analysing the interaction of verbal and visual elements, where text serves to «anchor» meaning. Critical discourse analysis (N. Fairclough, T. van Dijk, R. Wodak, M. Khosravi-Nik) and hegemony theory (E. Laclau, C. Mouffe) reveal the ideological dimension of memetic communication as a «discursive weapon». It participates in the construction of «us–them» identities and the formation of «echo chambers» (C. Sunstein, E. Pariser).

These theoretical foundations have enabled the formulation of the author's theoretical framework, which considers the political meme as a multimodal intertextual argument functioning in deictic space (P. Chilton) and constituting social reality through metaphorical recoding (J. Charteris-Black). This conceptual foundation serves as the basis for further analytical work.

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY AND APPLICATION OF THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of political memes requires the development of an integrated research apparatus that will reveal their complex, multi-layered nature. These artefacts of digital communication are multimodal and function at the intersection of linguistics, visual semiotics and social pragmatics. The application of a single theoretical framework, whether linguistic or cultural, is insufficient to encompass and study the full spectrum of their capacity for manipulation or persuasion. That is why this master's thesis uses an integrated, interdisciplinary framework to deconstruct the mechanisms underlying the creation, dissemination, and influence of political meme texts.

This section serves three main functions. First, it outlines the three-level analytical model that forms the methodological basis of this study. This model synthesises key theories from multimodality, semiotics, humour studies, rhetoric and critical discourse analysis. Second, it provides the experimental and research basis of the work, i.e., the criteria for selecting the material, the data collection methods, and the means of ensuring the reliability of the results. Third, it demonstrates the practical application of the analytical framework using five selected cases that illustrate the various functions of political memes. In this case, these range from ideological commentary and targeted satire to meta-commentary on the very nature of political discourse.

The term «meme» in this master's thesis is used interchangeably with the terms «meme-text» and «multimodal text.» This decision was made after analysing the recommendations of Barton and Lee [Barton, Lee 2013] regarding the multimodal nature of digital communication. In this way, stylistic repetitions are avoided and accurately reflect the multifaceted object of research.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of the Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is structured in three consecutive levels, ranging from the content of the meme to its function and ideological effect. The structure of the framework is based on the principles of Speech Act Theory [Austin 1962; Searle 1969]. Each meme is analysed through its locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions. This approach enables a systematic and reproducible analysis of each unit in the research sample.

The first level of analysis is called the semantic-semiotic structure (locutionary act). It focuses on the meme as a constructed text. At this stage, the components of the meme are examined and the literal and symbolic meanings they generate. The main questions to be answered are: what message does the meme convey, and how is this message constructed? To do this, multimodality theory [Kress, van Leeuwen 2006] and semiotics [Barthes 1967] are combined. Political memes are multimodal in nature, as they combine visual and linguistic means to create a coherent message. Therefore, the analysis at this level begins by examining the visual content of the image: composition, gaze vectors, character positioning, and visibility. This is necessary to understand how visual elements guide the viewer's interpretation. Subsequently, the intermodal connection between the text and the image is analysed. This relationship can be an anchor, where the text clarifies the meaning of the image, or a contradiction, where the text and image create ironic tension. Sometimes it can even be a recoding, where the text completely transforms the original meaning of the image.

Barthes' semiotic theory helps to distinguish between the denotation of a meme, i.e. its locution, descriptive meaning, and its connotation – the cultural, ideological and historical associations it evokes. Political memes are powerful precisely because they draw on a shared reservoir of connotations, activating deep cultural codes that the target audience immediately recognises. For example, analysis of the «Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog» [89] meme reveals a shift from

the neutral denotation of a cartoon frog to controversial political connotations. This is a vivid demonstration of how connotative meaning can be contested and appropriated by different political groups, as illustrated in **Figure 2.1**.



Figure 2.1. Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog [89]

The second level of the analysis explores the pragmatic function of the meme (illocutionary act). After the structural analysis, the following questions are addressed: what does this meme do? What action does it perform in the communicative space? To answer these questions, theories of humour and Aristotle's rhetoric are applied. Humour is primarily the main means of conveying the message of a meme, so two particularly relevant theories have been distinguished. The theory of incongruity [Kant 2007; Schopenhauer 1969] argues

that humour arises from the juxtaposition of incompatible or impossible concepts. This is the most common mechanism in memes, which often achieves its comic effect by placing political figures or ideas in unexpected contexts. The theory of superiority [Hobbes 2017] suggests that laughter occurs at the misfortunes or perceived stupidity of others, which results in a sense of superiority. This is a key tool of manipulation in political memes that ridicule opponents (e.g., memes about Trump's «Covfefe» [86], see **Fig. 2.2**, or Biden's «Sleepy Joe» [103], see **Fig. 2.3**).

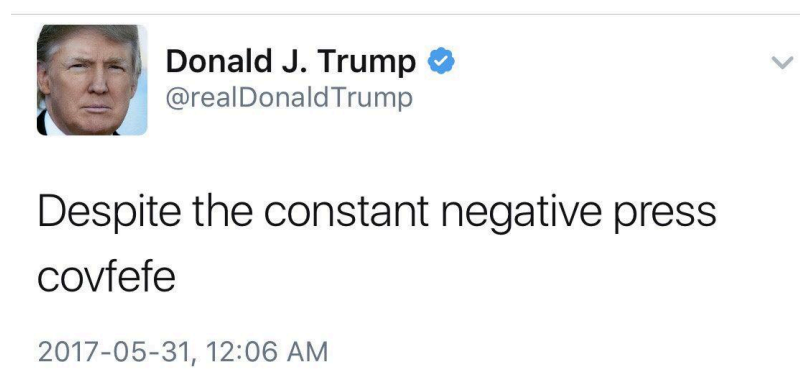


Figure 2.2. Donald Trump's tweet featuring the «covfefe» neologism [86]

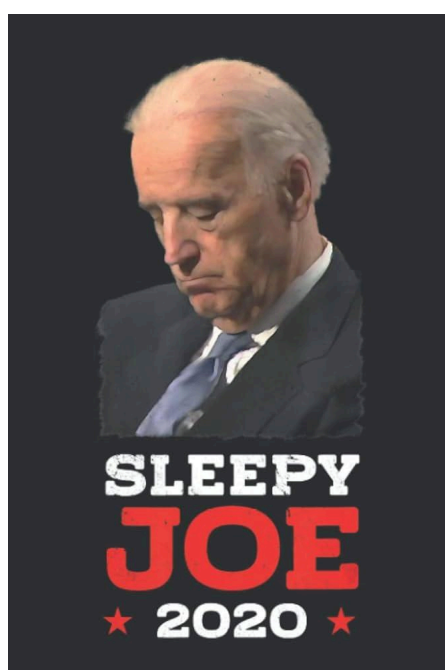


Figure 2.3. The «Sleepy Joe 2020» campaign poster as a tool of ridicule [103]

They are portrayed as incompetent, thereby reinforcing existing biases in the audience. The key strategy here is to shift the discourse from the cognitive to the emotional sphere, simplifying complex issues into objects of ridicule.

Memes also function as modern rhetorical enthymemes, persuading not through complete logical arguments, but through emotional and ethical appeals. Pathos, or appeals to emotion, is the dominant mode of persuasion in memes. They evoke strong emotions such as patriotism, anger, mockery, hope, or solidarity to shape the audience's attitudes. Ethos, an appeal to character or authority, demonstrates that memes are powerful tools for creating or destroying a politician's ethos. For example, the «Dark Brandon» [87] memes (**Fig. 2.4**) work to create a new, strong ethos for Biden, while most memes about Trump aim to undermine his authority.



Figure 2.4. «Dark Brandon» meme as an example of political ethos transformation [87]

In terms of Logos, or appeals to logic, memes rarely use formal logic, but often imitate it. Formats such as «Gru's Plan» [91] meme use a pseudo-logical narrative structure to criticise policies or decisions as a priori illogical (see **Fig. 2.5**). This leads the audience to a conclusion without providing factual evidence.



Figure 2.5. Application of the «Gru's Plan» format to Trump's political trajectory [91]

The third level of this analysis assesses the potential sociolinguistic and ideological function of the meme within the broader political discourse (the intended perlocutionary act). This level focuses on the analysis of the discursive strategies embedded in the meme and designed to create a certain effect. Therefore, the central question in this section is: what kind of influence on discourse is this meme constructed to have? Critical discourse analysis (CDA) [Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2015] provides tools for analysing how memes reproduce and challenge power structures and ideologies. Key concepts include framing, in-group/out-group formation, and dehumanisation. Framing demonstrates how a meme presents a particular issue to encourage a specific

interpretation. Memes often use coded language or shared knowledge to create a sense of belonging among «insiders» and alienate «outsiders.» In its most manipulative form, a meme can dehumanise opponents, as seen in the «NPC meme» (Non-Player Character) [101], which depicts political opponents as mindless automatons, as shown in **Figure 2.6**. This lowers the barrier to aggression.

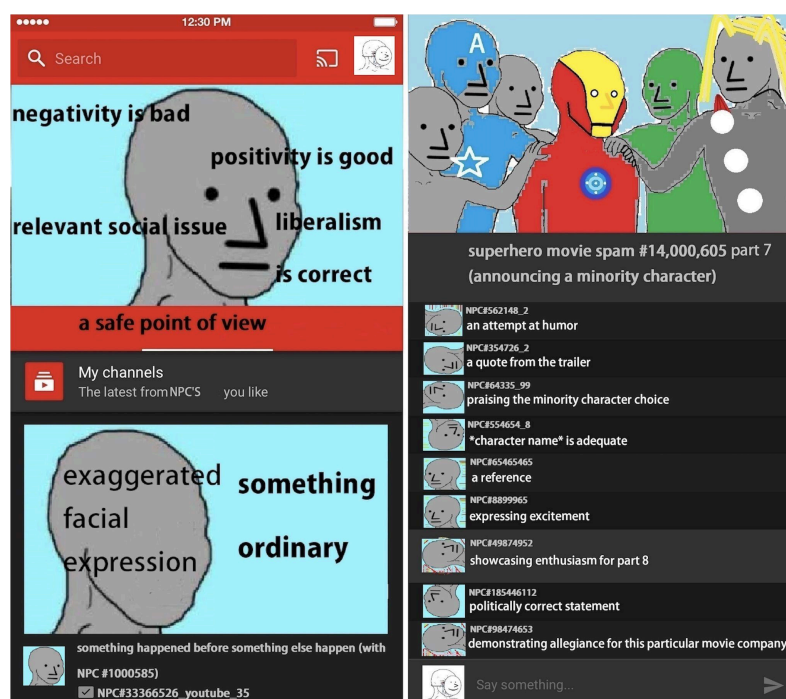


Figure 2.6. Visual representation of the «NPC meme» (Non-Player Character) [101]

Finally, the study draws on Shifman's 2014 Theory of Memes, which, following Dawkins' [Dawkins 2006] research, defines internet memes through patterns of their dissemination, imitation, and remixing. This part of the analysis explores how the meme format becomes a cultural replicator or element of visual grammar that users can endlessly reappropriate for new political contexts. It demonstrates the linguistic dynamics of memes in action and shows how stable visual syntaxes are constantly transformed and adapted to articulate new

ideological positions.

2.2. Experimental Research Base and Methods of Data Collection

The empirical basis of the study consists of 100 political memes collected from various digital platforms, which are categorised and presented in full in Appendices A–E. The time frame covers Joe Biden's presidency and the 2024 presidential campaign, but some memes appeared earlier or are still popular. The selection also includes iconic memes from the 2016 election cycle to track the long-term linguistic dynamics. It was done to ensure the material's topicality and political relevance. The geographical focus is mainly on the US political discourse. American digital and political meme culture seems to be the most developed and influential on a global scale. It is driven by platforms like Reddit, Twitter/X, and 4chan, and has historically been a major incubator and exporter of global meme formats [Phillips 2015; Shifman 2014].

Memes for the study were selected based on a number of criteria. First, «virality» was considered, i.e., popularity, organic reach, and engagement. Each meme had to receive a lot of interactions, i.e., likes, reposts, and comments. Setting a strict numerical threshold (e.g., 100, 000 likes) is really impractical due to the varying algorithms and user bases of different platforms. The selection criteria required that each meme demonstrate clear evidence of widespread adoption. It was determined by a combination of certain indicators:

- 1) high engagement rates on the original platform (usually tens of thousands of likes, reposts, or votes);
- 2) cross-platform spread, i.e., the meme appeared on several platforms (for example, it originated on Reddit and spread to Twitter/X and Instagram);
- 3) coverage in mainstream media or inclusion in academic and encyclopaedic resources such as *Know Your Meme*. It serves as post-factum

confirmation of its cultural significance.

These indicators testify to the widespread distribution and potential impact of the meme on the audience.

Second, the presence of explicit political content. This could be images of political figures, party symbols, ideological concepts, comments on political events, etc. Thirdly, mainly multimodal texts were selected that combine visual and textual components. This allows us to apply all levels of the analytical framework. Fourthly, the diversity in formats was also sought in order to cover different meme templates for sample representativeness. In addition, ideological balance was pursued from different points on the political spectrum to avoid bias. Finally, the authenticity of each meme's origin was verified from organic user content sources, rather than official political campaigns or advertising agencies.

The collection of material was carried out in stages throughout 2025. In the first stage, from March to June, selected platforms were monitored on a daily basis. The hashtags #PoliticalMemes, #Election2024, #Biden, and #Trump were reviewed and were observed on various accounts and public pages. The second stage, which lasted from June to August, involved archival research and verification. Information was systematically searched through the *Know Your Meme* archives to contextualise the origins of the formats and understand their evolution. To ensure the accuracy of linguistic interpretation, the study relied on lexicographical data from the Oxford English Dictionary [83] and the Urban Dictionary [84]. It was used to define standard terms and contemporary digital slang, respectively. Using Google Trends helped us verify the periods of viral spread of individual memes and correlate them with political events. Cross-checking with Wikipedia and academic articles on the relevant memes provided additional validation and context. The third stage in September was devoted to final verification. A database was created on Google Drive. The authenticity of each meme was also verified by searching for the latest versions

using TinEye. The political context was recorded by comparing the dates of publication of the memes with the news archives of leading media outlets (The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Fox News). This allowed the establishment of temporal correlations between memes and specific political crises, elections, and scandals.

From a total corpus of 100 memes, 20 were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis, representing five main functional categories. The category of ideological criticism (see Appendix A) targets systems and ideas and is represented by memes, including the «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] format and various critiques of capitalism. The category of personal satire (see Appendix B) aimed at specific political figures and includes memes such as «Gru's Plan» [91] about Trump, «Sleepy Joe» [103] and «Dark Brandon» [87]. The category of delegitimisation (see Appendix C) seeks to undermine the credibility of political actors or institutions and is represented by memes, such as «I Did That! [93]» and «Maya Rudolph as Kamala Harris» [98]. The metacommentary category (see Appendix D) reflects on the nature of political discourse itself and is represented by memes, such as «Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107] and «Expanding Brain» [90]. Finally, the category of emotional mobilisation (see Appendix E) is designed to evoke strong feelings of solidarity or resistance. It is represented by memes, «This is Fine» [104], or «No Thanks Buddy, I'm MAGA» [100], etc. This section provides a detailed analysis of five key – one from each category – as a demonstration of the application of the methodology.

The reliability of the research is ensured in several ways. First, triangulation of sources is used. Each meme was verified through at least two independent sources, including the platform of origin, *Know Your Meme* archives, mentions in the media or academic literature. Second, careful contextualisation is applied and memes are analysed in relation to specific political events, using news databases to establish temporal correlations. Third, the interdisciplinary approach, which synthesises theories from linguistics, semiotics, political science, and media

studies, avoids reductionism and ensures multidimensional analysis. Fourth, the systematic application of the same three-level analytical framework to all sample units ensures the reproducibility of results and the comparability of cases. Finally, the reflexivity is maintained. Awareness of our own position and possible interpretative biases is present, so alternative readings of memes by different audiences are taken into account.

2.3. Application of the Analytical Framework: Demonstration Cases

To demonstrate the practical utility of the analytical framework, in this section, it is applied to five diverse political memes. These cases were selected to illustrate the range of functions that memes perform: from ideological commentary and targeted satire to meta-commentary on the very nature of political discourse. Each analysis reveals the subtle strategies of persuasion and manipulation embedded in these texts and demonstrates how different levels of the analytical framework work together to reveal the full meaning of the meme.



Figure 2.7. Recontextualisation of the «Distracted Boyfriend» format for ideological contrast [88]

Case 1: The «Distracted Boyfriend» meme

The «Distracted Boyfriend»[88] meme (see **Fig. 2.7**) uses a popular stock photo format in which a man turns away from his girlfriend to look at another woman. In the political version, the man is labelled «The Youth,» his girlfriend is labelled «Capitalism,» and the woman who attracts his attention is labelled «Socialism.» This meme is a quintessential example of how universal visual narratives are recoded to articulate specific ideological positions.

The meaning of the meme is created through the interaction of visual grammar and superimposed text. The original image presents a narrative of infidelity, constructed through the vectors of the gaze of the three participants. The man's averted gaze creates visual tension, signifying a conflict between his current obligations and a new attraction. The text labels perform a recoding function, transforming this personal drama into a political allegory. The intermodal connection is key. Without the text, the political meaning is absent. The image's composition uses a classic triadic structure, with the central figure serving as the agent of choice between two alternatives.

The cultural unit is saturated with connotative meaning that goes beyond its literal denotation. Each textual label activates a set of cultural and ideological associations. «Capitalism» is connoted as an established but unsatisfactory status quo, and the girl's facial expression embodies a sense of ownership and dissatisfaction. In contrast, «Socialism» is connoted as a new, attractive and desirable alternative. The woman's red dress is a powerful semiotic marker historically associated with left-wing movements, reinforcing this reading. «The Youth» is positioned as an agent of change, embodying a generational shift in ideological preferences.

The humour of the meme comes mainly from the theory of incongruity. It juxtaposes the abstract realm of high-stakes political economy with the mundane, familiar scenario of a love triangle. This incongruity simplifies a complex

discussion, making it accessible and amusing. The meme also draws on superiority theory, as it can be interpreted in two ways. Supporters of socialism may feel more confident and superior to the «outdated» defenders of capitalism. Critics, on the other hand, may feel superior to «naive» young people who are seduced by a seemingly simple but dangerous idea.

The meme's ability to persuade relies almost entirely on emotion and pushes logical argumentation into the background. It appeals to feelings of dissatisfaction with the present and the allure of a new, promising future. The key emotions here are desire, disappointment, and curiosity. However, the axiological meaning of this appeal is not predetermined and is highly dependent on the audience's interpretation. The meme functions to construct or destroy the ethos of the ideologies. How this is perceived is ambiguous.

For an audience sympathetic to leftist ideas, the meme effectively destroys the ethos of capitalism. It depicts it as an unattractive, intrusive partner. Conversely, it constructs a positive ethos for socialism as something a priori desirable, without any substantial evidence to support this claim. The meme also deliberately avoids logical reasoning. It offers no data or arguments in favour of the ideological shift it depicts. Instead, the visual metaphor itself is presented as a form of pseudo-logical proof. It suggests a cause-and-effect relationship, where there is only an alleged correlation.

However, as noted, this interpretation is not the only one possible. Those grounded in traditional moral frameworks may interpret the underlying scenario of infidelity as a vice. From this perspective, «The Youth's» action is not one of liberation but of disloyalty and poor judgment. In this reading, socialism is not an attractive alternative. It is a dangerous temptation. The meme functions as a critique of the perceived naivety and moral fickleness of the younger generation. Thus, the meme does not construct a single positive ethos. It presents a scenario whose moral and political interpretation is left open to the viewer.

The main ideological function of the meme is framing. It frames the complex socio-economic phenomenon of growing interest in socialism as a simple, natural act of personal choice. Such framing trivialises the risks and complexities associated with systemic change. This makes the idea more acceptable and less radical to a wider audience. The cultural replicator reinforces generational and ideological identity. It constructs «The Youth» as a single group that opposes the established order. This creates a group of «insiders,» progressive thinkers. At the same time, it positions the defenders of capitalism as «outsiders» who are left behind. This meme is a quintessential example of political remixing. The original «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] format proved to be extremely successful as a replicator due to its universal and simple grammatical structure. This political variant mimics this structure but inserts new ideological content. This illustrates the linguistic dynamics of memes, where stable visual syntaxes are repurposed to articulate and rapidly spread new political messages.

This case was chosen as a demonstration of the basic application of the framework due to its structural simplicity and broad recognition. A preliminary analysis has shown that its main interpretative problem and its main strength as a memetic text lie in its profound polyvalence. It can plausibly be read as left-wing satire, where young people rightly reject capitalism. It can also be read as right-wing criticism, where naive young people are seduced by a dangerous ideology. This ambivalence is typical of highly successful political memes and requires an awareness of the multiplicity of possible readings by different audiences. It is recognised that meaning is often constructed by the audience rather than unambiguously conveyed by the text itself.



Figure 2.8. Narrative structure of the «Gru’s Plan» meme in Case Study 2 [91]

Case 2: Gru's Plan meme

The «Gru’s Plan» [91] format (see **Fig. 2.8**) comes from the cartoon *Despicable Me* and uses a four-panel structure. The villain Gru presents his plan on a board, and in the last panel reacts with shock to his own plan. In the political version, Gru has been visually modified. Yellow hair has been added to make him resemble Donald Trump. The plan consists of three steps: run for president as a publicity stunt, actually become president, and actually become president again, but this time with an expression of utter shock on the character's face.

The meaning of this meme is constructed through a sequential narrative that combines static images, text, and key visual modifications. The four-panel structure creates a chronology of events. The viewer is led through a plan with an unexpected outcome. The decisive multimodal element is the crudely drawn yellow hair placed on the character Gru, which acts as an instant and minimalist visual signifier of Donald Trump. Humour and meaning are generated by the contrast between the repetitive text in the last two panels and Gru's dramatically changed facial expression, from manic excitement to horrified shock.

The meme uses existing connotations of both the character and the format.

The choice of Gru as a substitute for Trump is ideologically significant. Gru is a villain, but a comically inept one whose grandiose plans often fail. This immediately connotes that Trump is not a serious or threatening figure, but rather a clumsy antagonist. The narrative act connotes the concept of unintended consequence. The presidency is framed not as a calculated political achievement, but as a joke or publicity stunt that got out of hand. It horrifies even its own architect.

The main humorous mechanism of this meme is the theory of incongruity. The incongruity lies in the fact that the character reacts with embarrassment to the successful completion of his own plan. This undermines the viewer's expectations of a triumphant outcome. This humour serves a manipulative purpose, as it encourages the audience to accept the premise of the meme without critical reflection. The meme also relies heavily on the theory of superiority. It invites an audience that is opposed to Trump to laugh at him. This positions him as an accidental president who was unprepared for his own success. This creates a sense of intellectual and moral superiority in the viewer and reinforces their existing biases.

Rhetorically, the meme is a direct attack on the authority of its subject. It evokes feelings of mockery, cynical humour, and schadenfreude. For those who opposed Trump's presidency, it provides a cathartic narrative that confirms their perception of the event as absurd and illegitimate. The central function of the meme is to destroy Trump's ethos as a leader. It reframes his ambitions as insincere and his victory as accidental. It depicts him as shocked by his own success and powerfully conveys the idea that Trump is incompetent, unqualified, and never really intended to run the country. The meme functions as a narrative that supplants logical argument. It offers no evidence to support the claim that Trump's campaign was a joke. Instead, it presents this claim as a premise for a humorous story. The narrative format is inherently persuasive and encourages the

viewer to accept the conclusion without demanding factual evidence.

The meme is a powerful framing tool. It frames the entire 2016 US presidential election not as a complex political event driven by socio-economic factors, but as a farce that went wrong. This frame serves to delegitimise both the candidate and the election results. They are portrayed as an aberration rather than a reflection of the will of the people. The meme also serves to strengthen the identity of the group of «us» who are opposed to Trump. Understanding and spreading this meme acts as a social signal of belonging to a community that considers Trump's presidency fundamentally absurd. It creates a shared cultural script for expressing dissent and distrust.

The meme illustrates the principle of remixing. The «Gru's Plan» [91] format is a stable and widely understood grammar for telling stories about failed plans. The creator remixed this template. He applied it to a specific political context, adding a simple visual image of hair and text outlining Trump's political trajectory. This demonstrates the linguistic dynamics of memes and shows how flexible pop culture templates are constantly being repurposed for targeted political satire and commentary.

This case demonstrates the complexity of attributing authorial intent in memes. It is unclear whether the creator of the meme truly believes in the narrative of an «accidental presidency» or is simply using a popular format for humorous effect. In addition, questions arise regarding temporality. The meme was created after Trump's inauguration, so it functions as a retrospective reinterpretation of events rather than real-time commentary. This highlights the importance of contextualising memes in time to understand their pragmatic function.



Figure 2.9. The «I Did That!» sticker as an example of meme migration into physical space [93]

Case 3: «I Did That!»

The «I Did That!» [93] meme (**Fig. 2.9**) represents a fascinating case of political meme evolution, as it migrates from the digital screen to the physical world. It first appeared as stickers on petrol stations across the United States in 2021-2022 during a period of rising fuel prices. Now, this meme functions as a direct and tangible form of grassroots political protest. The sticker features a cut-out image of President Joe Biden smiling and pointing his finger, with the declarative text «I Did That!»

The meaning of the meme is constructed through a powerful intermodal connection between a simple visual-textual unit and its specific physical context. It is critical to understand that the meaning is incomplete until the sticker is placed next to the high price on the petrol station display. This physical act of placement is crucial. It reinforces the message of the meme and transforms an ordinary image into a poignant accusation. Without this contextual placement, the meme loses its communicative power.

The meme uses a simple but effective semiotic strategy. The denotation consists of the image of the politician and the declarative phrase. However, its placement creates a powerful connotation, as it directly blames the president's unilateral actions for high petrol prices, a complex economic problem. Biden's smile, which in another context might seem friendly, is recoded as smug and boastful. It seems as if he is proudly taking responsibility for the economic difficulties faced by consumers. This deliberate misreading of his facial expression is a key part of the meme's manipulative power.

The main mechanism of persuasion is not so much humour as direct and sarcastic accusation, functioning as a form of political satire. Any humour present here comes from the incongruity of the situation. The president ostensibly boasts about a negative outcome. However, the main illocutionary act of the meme's creator is to express disappointment and assign blame. Rhetorically, the meme is a direct attack on President Biden's ethos, specifically his perceived economic competence. It completely bypasses logos, offering no evidence or economic rationale. Instead, it creates a powerful but fallacious visual argument through simple association. Biden is pictured next to a high price tag, which presents him as the agent responsible for the cause of high prices. This is a classic example of the logical fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. The appeal to pathos taps into the real anger and anxiety of consumers facing rising costs. This frustration is directed at a single political target.

The most powerful ideological function of the meme is the use of framing. It frames the complex, global problem of inflation and energy prices, which is caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain disruptions, as well as the war in Ukraine. Here, it appears to be the direct fault of one person's policies. This simplified frame is a powerful tool for political manipulation because it reduces a multifaceted issue to an easily digestible narrative of blame. It serves as a constant and visible reminder of this political message and also appears in the

everyday environment of the petrol station. This reinforces the narrative every time a citizen fills up their car. The meme also serves to strengthen the identity of a group of «insiders» who are opposed to Biden. The act of sticking the sticker is a form of political participation. Albeit potentially vandalism and seeing the sticker creates a sense of community and validation for those who hold similar views. It serves as a physical manifestation of digital sentiment and illustrates how meme tactics can be used for guerrilla marketing-style propaganda. Although this is not a traditional template for remixes, its reproducibility lies in the mass production of the stickers themselves. They function as identical units of cultural and political transmission, spreading a single message across the country.



Figure 2.10. «Woman Yelling At a Cat» meme as a metacommentary on political discourse [107]

Case 4: «Woman Yelling At a Cat»

The «Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107] meme (**Fig. 2.10**) is a striking example of a universal, flexible format that has been reimagined to comment on the very nature of political discourse. It combines two unrelated images: an emotional woman from the reality show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, who is shouting and pointing an accusing finger, and the unperturbed white cat

Smudge, sitting at the dinner table in front of a plate of vegetables. In the political version, the woman is labelled «screaming political ideology I don't like», and the cat is labelled «political ideology I like».

The meaning of the meme is constructed through the stark multimodal contrast between its two constituent panels. The juxtaposition of these two unrelated images creates a compelling visual narrative of hysterical accusation met with bewildered indifference. The superimposed text then recodes this dynamic into a political metacommentary. The meme uses a rich set of connotations to achieve its effect. The woman's facial expression conveys irrationality, hysteria, and baseless accusations. Her emotional state is presented as a negative trait. It is worth noting that the use of a woman as a symbol of emotional illogicality may reinforce gender stereotypes. In contrast, the calm, slightly dismissive expression of the cat connotes stoicism, rationality, and an undeserved sense of sacrifice. The cat is positioned as the calm and reasonable side in the face of an unbalanced attack. This semiotic framework allows the creator of the meme to portray their ideological opponents as emotionally unstable and illogical, while characterising their own side as restrained and rational.

The main mechanism of persuasion is humour, which comes from the theory of incongruity. The absurdity of the situation, where a person yells at a cat, and the cat supposedly responds with an indifferent look, creates a comical scenario that instantly disarms the viewer. This humour then becomes a tool for manipulative purposes and draws on the theory of superiority. The meme invites the viewer to identify with the calm, logical cat and laugh at the hysterical woman. This act of identification and mockery creates a sense of intellectual and emotional superiority over the opposing ideology. This reinforces the viewer's own political biases. It is a powerful tool for confirming one's own beliefs as a priori more rational.

Rhetorically, the meme is a direct attack on the ethos of the opposing ideology. By portraying the woman as screaming, the meme strips her of any authority and depicts her as incapable of reasoned discussion. At the same time, it constructs a positive ethos for the ideology supported by the creator and associates it with calmness and reason. The meme completely bypasses logos, as it does not present any real arguments from either side. Instead, it replaces meaningful discussion with a caricature of emotional versus rational temperaments. The appeal to pathos is subtle but effective. It evokes a sense of smugness in the viewer, who identifies with the cat and contempt for the woman's emotional display.

The meme is an extremely effective framing tool in structuring the viewer's perception of political differences. It frames ideological conflict not as a legitimate debate between different opinions, but as a confrontation between reason and hysteria. This frame delegitimises the emotional components of political argumentation and promotes a false dichotomy where one's own side is always rational, and the opposite side is emotional and illogical. This is particularly problematic because emotions, empathy, and outrage at injustice are a legitimate and important part of political discourse. It serves to reinforce «us,» the calm cats, and caricature «them,» the screaming women. In doing so, it deepens political polarisation. The meme not only comments on existing differences but also actively constructs an irreconcilable opposition between the two sides. The meme illustrates the principle of remixing in its purest form. The format is a stable and widely understood grammar for depicting any dynamic of accusation and denial. This political variant simply inserts ideological labels into an already existing syntax. It demonstrates the linguistic dynamics of memes and shows how a flexible, apolitical pop culture template can be constantly repurposed. It is a powerful tool for meta-commentary on the political process itself.



Figure 2.11. Satirical hierarchy of political engagement in the «Expanding Brain» format [90]

Case 5: «Expanding Brain»

The «Expanding Brain» [90] meme (**Fig. 2.11**) uses a four-panel format with progressively larger and brighter images of the brain to create a satirical commentary on different levels of political engagement. The text represents a progression from simple apathy through party conformity and nuanced critical thinking, back to apathy. Now it's like higher wisdom. The first panel contains a normal brain with the text «Not having a political opinion.» The second panel shows a slightly larger brain with «Agreeing with all your party's beliefs.» The third panel shows a bright blue brain with «Not disagreeing with something just because it's what the other party believes in.» The fourth panel shows the brightest galactic brain again, with «Not having a political opinion.»

The meaning of the meme is constructed through a sequential, hierarchical

narrative presented in four panels. Each panel combines a textual description of a political position with a corresponding image of a brain that gradually becomes larger, brighter, and more powerful. The multimodal connection between the increasing visual intensity of the brain and the text creates a framework for ranking different intellectual or philosophical positions. The meme uses the connotations inherent in this format to construct its satirical argument. The format is usually used ironically, where the final, most enlightened state is actually the most absurd or simplistic idea. The visual hierarchy initially suggests that the third stage is the pinnacle of rational thought. However, the meme subverts this expectation in the last panel.

The final state of the galactic brain, accompanied by an image of transcendent, god-like consciousness, is a return to the initial state, «Not having a political opinion.» This creates a cyclical structure that is key to the meme's irony. Crucially, the verbal message is identical to the first panel, but the visual message is its polar opposite. The sequence of the panels matters immensely. The final stage of apathy is not a result of ignorance, as in the first panel. It is a supposed consequence of perfect awareness achieved through experience. The two intermediate stages, partisan conformity and nuanced thinking, are presented as necessary steps on a journey that ultimately leads back to detachment. The message is not simply that apathy is bad. Even deep political engagement paradoxically leads to a form of enlightened cynicism.

The main mechanism of persuasion is humour, derived from the theory of incongruity, particularly through the use of sarcasm and irony. The denouement consists of a cyclical and anti-climactic conclusion. The enormous visual build-up promises a profound revelation, which turns out to be a regression to the simplest form of political disengagement. This ironic twist functions as a tool of manipulation, subtly promoting a cynical worldview. It also incorporates a theory of superiority and allows viewers who understand the irony to feel intellectually

superior to all the positions depicted – apathetic, partisan, and even seemingly educated centrist. The meme suggests that true enlightenment lies in recognising the futility of the entire political spectrum.

Rhetorically, the meme functions as a critique of the political process itself. It avoids taking a specific partisan position and instead attacks the very notion of political engagement. It presents apathy as the starting and ending point of intellectual evolution. In this way, it undermines the ethos of all political actors and ideologies. It uses a pseudo-logical narrative structure, a progression of enlightenment, to reach an anti-logical conclusion. Deep reflection on politics leads a person back to not thinking about it at all. The appeal to pathos targets feelings of cynicism, disillusionment, and political fatigue to resonate with an audience that may feel alienated by party divisions.

As a framing tool, the meme frames political participation as a futile and ultimately cyclical exercise. It presents a narrative where party loyalty is simplistic and nuanced thinking is a temporary phase. The ultimate wisdom lies in complete detachment. This frame can serve to depoliticise its audience. It promotes apathy as a justified intellectual position. This is particularly problematic in a democratic context, as active civic participation is necessary for the system to function. It creates a group of «insiders,» educated cynics who see themselves as above political battles. At the same time, it frames all forms of political engagement, from blind partisanship to thoughtful involvement, as less developed states of consciousness. The meme illustrates the principle of remixing. The Expanding Brain format is a stable and widely understood grammar for creating satirical hierarchies. This political variant mimics this structure, but inserts content that criticises the very nature of political beliefs. This demonstrates the linguistic dynamics of memes. It also shows how a flexible template can be repurposed not only to support or attack a specific ideology, but also to comment on the entire matrix of political discourse and participation.

This case is perhaps the most difficult to interpret due to its multi-layered irony. Stuart Hall [1980] described such an illustration as the lack of an «inherent» meaning in the text. It is unclear whether the meme actually promotes apathy. Maybe it mocks those who use cynicism as an excuse for non-participation. Or is it a criticism of political fatigue, or its normalisation? This case demonstrates the central problem of meme research. The ironic distance makes the author's intention almost opaque. Moreover, the polysemy of the format means that different audiences can interpret the same meme in radically different ways. Some may see it as an excuse for political apathy. For others, it is a satire on this apathy, or even a call for more nuanced political thinking. The interpretation becomes clear only through audience reactions (e.g., comments). The one-way nature of the meme itself preserves this ambiguity. This multiplicity of meanings is both the strength and weakness of memes as objects of study.

Conclusions to Chapter 2

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive three-level analytical framework for studying political memes. It synthesises theories from multimodality, semiotics, humour, rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, and memology. The core of this methodology is a systematic multi-stage procedure that moves from the structural level (locutionary act) to the functional (illocutionary act) and finally to the socio-ideological dimension (perlocutionary act). This approach ensures that political memes are analysed as dynamic speech acts with specific pragmatic goals.

The experimental research base of the study consists of 100 memes collected during 2025. It provides a representative cross-section of contemporary English-language digital discourse. The selection of material followed a strict protocol based on criteria of virality, multimodality and ideological diversity. The reliability of the findings is further guaranteed by the triangulation of sources, careful contextualisation with news archives (The Guardian, BBC, CNN), an interdisciplinary approach that avoids reductionism.

Five demonstration cases illustrate the practical application and validate the functional capacity of the analytical framework. The «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] meme demonstrates how universal visual narratives are recoded for ideological commentary and frame complex economic issues as simple personal choices. The «Gru's Plan» [91] meme shows how popular formats are used to delegitimise political figures through narratives of unintended consequences. The «I Did That!» [93] case reveals the evolution of memes into physical space and their ability to frame complex global issues as the fault of a single person. The «Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107] meme illustrates how memes construct false dichotomies between reason and emotion and deepen political polarisation. Finally, «Expanding Brain» demonstrates a meta-commentary on political participation itself and the potential of memes to depoliticise audiences by

promoting cynicism.

The practical testing of the methodology also revealed its inherent limitations and challenges. The polyvalence of memes, as seen in the «Distracted Boyfriend» and «Expanding Brain» [90] cases, means that they can be interpreted differently by various audiences. The multilayered irony often makes authorial intent opaque. Additionally, the analysis highlighted the need to consider the materiality of memes and their intersectional (gendered or racial) dimensions. Despite these interpretive hurdles, the framework proved to be a robust tool for identifying hidden manipulative strategies.

This methodological foundation has prepared the ground for the main analytical work in the next chapter. There, the research moves from individual cases to synthesising broader patterns across the entire sample. Building on insights gained here, the next chapter will systematically explore how precedent phenomena, as pre-existing cultural grammars drawn from popular culture, archetypal situations, and historical figures, function as the primary engine of persuasion and manipulation in contemporary political discourse.

CHAPTER 3. INTERTEXTUAL MECHANISMS OF PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION IN POLITICAL MEMES

3.1 Typology of Intertextual References in Political Memes

Based on an analysis of 20 selected memetic texts, it was concluded that their construction is consistently based on the activation of four main types of intertextual references. This pattern is systematic, not random. This observation reflects the profound nature of the meme as a communicative phenomenon that exists exclusively in conditions of shared cultural knowledge between the author and the audience. As researcher Julia Kristeva noted, any text is a «mosaic of quotations» and «the absorption and transformation of other texts» [Kristeva 1980, p. 66]. When it comes to political memes, this statement becomes particularly relevant. Intertextuality here is not a stylistic device, but a constitutive condition for the very existence of a memetic text.

A typology is proposed covering four categories: precedent texts, precedent situations, precedent figures, and precedent utterances. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes a single meme can evoke several types of references at once. In order to perform a systematic analysis, each meme was classified in the sample according to its main intertextual source. This typology helps to identify common patterns that political memes use to construct their messages.

3.1.1. Precedent texts as a source of memetic formats

Precedent texts are specific, identifiable works of popular culture. In particular, they come from films, cartoons, television shows, video games, or comics. Their narrative structures, characters, or visual styles have already become part of the collective cultural consciousness. Memes in this category are a common source for contemporary meme formats in the sample. This confirms Shifman's observation that contemporary meme culture is inseparable from mass media culture [Shifman 2014].

The creator of a meme imports not just a visual format, but a whole semiotic package. The borrowing of a ready-made set of connotations, character archetypes, narrative expectations, and even emotional associations is traced. This property is the fundamental difference between this category and others. It allows complex political ideas to be conveyed through a familiar and often humorous prism. In addition, it minimises the cognitive load on the audience.



Figure 3.1. Semiotic transference of Gru's character traits onto Donald Trump
[91]

«Gru's Plan» [91] (**Fig. 3.1**), which was analysed in detail in Chapter 2, is a case in point. The four-panel structure from the animated film *Despicable Me* (2010) becomes an instrument of political criticism. The meme format is based on the borrowed narrative logic of «a plan with an unexpected, disastrous outcome.» The viewer recognises this even before reading the text. The creator of the meme does not simply insert new captions, but imports the image of Gru as a «comical villain with grandiose but doomed plans». This is actually the key operation, because the connotation is transferred to the political figure depicted in the meme. This is Trump, marked by his yellow hair. This technique performs a delegitimising function even before the audience realises the specific message.



Figure 3.2. Visual opposition of the emotional and the rational in «Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107]

«Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107] (**Fig. 3.2**) is a particularly complex case, as it is a composite of two different precedent texts. A frame from the reality show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2011) and a photo of Smudge the cat from Instagram were semiotically incompatible until they were combined into a single memetic format. Their juxtaposition generates an emergent meaning. It is even greater than the sum of its parts. The visual grammar of the opposition between «emotional/irrational» and «rational/stoic» subjects is observed. Barthes' analysis allows the argument that it is this container format, rather than the specific textual content, that carries the main ideological load and offers a ready-made template for caricaturing any discussion.



Figure 3.3. Parodic logic of the academic hierarchy in the «Expanding Brain» format [90]

«Expanding Brain» [90] (**Fig. 3.3**) comes from the genre of pseudoscientific diagrams depicting the escalation of consciousness. This genre is itself a precedent text. It parodies the academic hierarchy of knowledge. The memetic format has adopted this parodic logic and turned it into a universal template for ironic hierarchies of any content, including political ones. It is quite telling that the final and «most enlightened» state in a meme is always either the most absurd or a return to the simplest. This is a structural irony inherent in the very grammar of the format.



Figure 3.4. The «American Chopper Argument» as a model of dichotomous conflict [85]



Figure 3.5. Intertextual reference to anime in the «Is This a Pigeon?» political meme [94]

«American Chopper Argument» [85] (**Fig. 3.4**) and «Is This a Pigeon?» [94] (**Fig. 3.5**) illustrate another pattern. Memes can draw precedent material from cultural products with a relatively narrow original audience. For example, an American reality show or a 1991 Japanese anime. In the process of memetisation, the format essentially breaks away from its source and acquires its own cultural grammar. Today, millions of users recognise these formats, even though they have never seen the original shows. This demonstrates how an intertextual reference can become an autonomous semiotic sign.

A common feature of all memes in this category is that they function on two levels simultaneously, namely the level of the message itself and the level of meta-commentary on the precedent text. An audience that recognises the source derives additional cognitive pleasure from the very fact of recognition. This is an important mechanism for forming group identity and strengthening the emotional connection with the meme.

3.1.2. Precedent situations as archetypal scenarios of persuasion

Mememes in this category, unlike the previous one, are not tied to a specific work of mass culture. Their persuasive power lies in their appeal to universal human scenarios that any audience can recognise, regardless of their cultural background. Analysis of the sample revealed several dominant archetypal situations that are systematically used to construct political messages.



Figure 3.6. The archetypal situation of temptation in the «Distracted Boyfriend» adaptation [88]

There is a situation of temptation and infidelity in «Distracted Boyfriend» [88]. The meme (**Fig. 3.6**) is based on one of the oldest and most universal human situations – a love triangle and temptation. The stock photo shows a man turning away from his girlfriend to look at another woman. This activates a cultural script of infidelity that is recognisable in all cultures. This makes the meme an extremely flexible template. The triadic structure of «current commitment – agent of choice – new temptation» can be applied to any political choice.

In the version where «Youth» turns away from «Capitalism» to «Socialism,» the precedent situation serves a dual rhetorical function. On the one hand, it frames ideological choice as a natural and emotionally understandable process without rational complexity. On the other hand, it imports moral ambivalence. Infidelity is understandable, but not always an acceptable action. As noted in Chapter 2, this ambivalence is the source of the meme's polyvalence. Depending on their own values, the audience can read the same image either as liberation or as betrayal. This confirms Hall's [1980] thesis that the author encodes meaning, but the audience decodes it according to their cultural position.

Importantly, it is the situational, rather than textual, nature of this precedent that makes it virtually limitless in its reproducibility. According to *Know Your Meme* [82], the «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] format has been used tens of thousands of times in dozens of languages and cultural contexts, from comments on technology trends to international politics. This versatility would be simply impossible for memes that rely on precedent texts with a culturally specific source.



Figure 3.7. Visualisation of the dilemma of choice in the «Two Buttons» format [106]

There is a dilemma and paralysis of choice in «Two Buttons» [106] (**Fig. 3.7**). The meme depicts a sweaty character hovering over two buttons in panic. He is unable to press either one. The meme thus appeals to another universal archetype – the situation of an unsolvable dilemma. The cultural script here is as follows: the subject is faced with a choice between two options (e.g., «stay out of politics» or

«sacrifice everything»). Each option is both attractive and problematic. The inability to make a choice leads to a grotesque but recognisable reaction – an anxious freeze.

In political applications, this format serves to criticise inconsistency or even hypocrisy. The typical structure features two buttons and two contradictory principles or two positions. A certain politician or party supposedly adheres to both at the same time. The character below the buttons symbolises this actor. The meme does not provide any arguments, but only visualises the contradiction and leaves the audience with the conclusion that the subject is inconsistent or incompetent.

From a rhetorical point of view, this format is an example of what Aristotle called an enthymeme. It is an abbreviated syllogism where one of the premises is omitted, and the audience fills it in. The meme provides the «minor premise» (the two conflicting political positions) and the «conclusion» (the character panics). The «major premise» is hidden. For example, «holding contradictory positions» is bad. It indicates incompetence, etc. The audience fills in this premise on their own. This makes the argument more effective than a direct accusation.



Figure 3.8. The situation of crisis denial in the «This is Fine» meme [104]

There is a situation of denial of crisis in «This is Fine» [104] (**Fig. 3.8**). The meme depicts a dog sitting calmly at a table in a room engulfed in flames, drinking coffee. This appeals to a deeply recognisable psychological situation where there is cognitive dissonance in the face of obvious disaster. This is a precedent situation of denial. The subject demonstrates ostensible normality in conditions that are objectively abnormal.

The meme has a specific source – a webcomic by K.C. Green (2013). Its power as a memetic format lies precisely in the situational, rather than textual, precedent. Most users who spread this meme have never read the original comic. They recognise the situation, not the source.

In a political context, «This is Fine» [104] is systematically used to depict government or institutional responses to crisis situations. The precedent situation performs an extremely effective framing function here. It effectively translates a complex, nuanced political position (e.g., «I'm okay with the events that are unfolding currently») into the realm of absurd denial of the obvious. This is a striking example of what van Dijk [2015] calls «ideological framing,» i.e., a way of representing reality that makes alternative interpretations impossible.

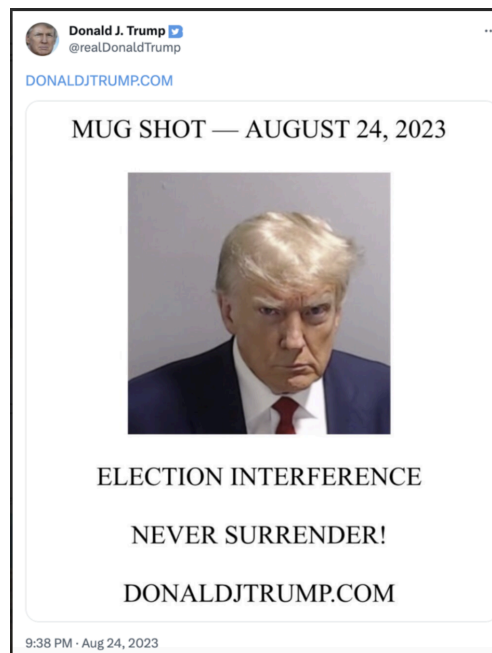


Figure 3.9. Use of Donald Trump’s mugshot as a mechanism of delegitimisation
[105]

There is a situation of public humiliation and ridicule of appearance in «Trump’s Mugshot» [105] (**Fig. 3.9**) and related memes. This is a separate subcategory of precedent situations, as here the memes are based on the social situation of ridiculing a person on the basis of their appearance or unusual physical characteristics. Memes about Trump's hairstyle, his complexion, or gestures activate a familiar social script about childhood and teenage teasing about appearance. This reflects a culturally universal experience.

The rhetorical effectiveness of this type of meme can be explained by several factors. First, ridiculing appearance is one of the most primitive and direct mechanisms of delegitimisation. It transfers the subject from the sphere of serious politics to the sphere of physical grotesqueness. Second, such memes appeal to the theory of superiority [Hobbes 2017]. The viewer feels superior to the person being ridiculed. Third, they are as accessible as possible, as their understanding does not require any cultural or media knowledge.

However, as Fairclough [1995] notes, such memes also have a potentially problematic discursive effect. They shift attention from the real content of politics to the superficial characteristics of the subject. This simplifies and trivialises political discourse.



Figure 3.10. The situation of sarcastic accusation at a petrol station [93]

There is a situation of sarcastic accusation in physical space in «I Did That!» [93] (Fig. 3.10). This meme is a particularly telltale example, as it transfers a precedent situation from digital to physical space. It features a visual and textual representation of President Biden, pointing his finger with the caption «I Did That!». The rhetorical power of the meme lies in undermining political responsibility. Politicians usually try to shift the blame for negative consequences away from themselves, but the meme forcibly places the responsibility on them. The author placed this sticker on a petrol station and created an ironic confession in which a political figure is ironically «forced» to take responsibility for high prices. This

creates a form of spatial intertextuality, where the sticker enters into direct dialogue with the surrounding economic context (the price tag). This action transforms an everyday object into a site of political confrontation.

This case demonstrates that a precedent situation can function not only as a template for an image. It can also be a performative action. Within Austin's framework [1962], placing the sticker is both a locutionary act (the utterance «I Did That!») and an illocutionary act (the act of accusation). This expands the understanding of memetic intertextuality beyond the purely digital environment and points to the material dimension of memetic communication.

The analysis of memes based on precedent situations reveals several common patterns crucial for understanding their persuasive power.

First, all such memes perform an operation of conceptual simplification: complex, multidimensional political phenomena, such as ideological choice, economic crisis, or government incompetence, are reduced to a single recognisable situation with clearly defined roles. Shifman [2014, p. 23] calls this the «hypermemonic logic,» i.e., the ability to convey complexity through simplicity.

Secondly, all the memes considered function as rhetorical enthymemes. The key premise here is a moral assessment of the situation, but it is not articulated, rather inferred by the audience. This makes the message more effective and more resistant to critical analysis.

Thirdly, unlike precedent texts, precedent situations have a higher potential for cross-cultural dissemination. They do not require the audience to be familiar with a specific cultural product. This explains why these formats, based on archetypal situations, most often become global memetic phenomena.

3.1.3. Precedent figures as symbolic archetypes of political discourse

If precedent texts and situations provide ready-made narrative structures for memetic communication, precedent figures provide something qualitatively different.

Namely, fixed symbolic images that are deeply saturated with cultural, historical or religious connotations. As was established in Chapter 1, precedent figures function through the mechanism of semiotic transference. Barthes [1957] described this as the naturalisation of the ideological through myth. The audience perceives connotations not as imposed, but as self-evident. A meme may depict a politician alongside iconography of the Madonna, but it does not explain that the Madonna symbolises sacrifice and holiness. The audience knows this without explanation. It is this «pre-loaded» meaning that makes precedent figures a particularly powerful tool for persuasion and manipulation.

Analysis of memes in this category in the sample allows us to identify several fundamentally different types of precedent figures. They differ in both their origin and mechanism of action.



Figure 3.11. Superimposition of the Emperor Palpatine archetype onto Joe Biden [87]

There is a figure from popular culture as a political archetype in «Dark Brandon» [87] (**Fig. 3.11**). This meme illustrates a fundamentally different mechanism for working with a precedent figure. «Dark Brandon» [87] is based on an ironic and deliberately exaggerated borrowing of an image, rather than a direct and unambiguous appeal to the Madonna archetype.

The primary precedent source is the image of Emperor Palpatine (or Darth Sidious) from the Star Wars universe. This is an archetypal figure of a dark, omnipotent ruler with burning eyes who manipulates events from the shadows. The meme transformed Biden's photos and added this very effect of burning eyes and gloomy lighting to them. In this way, the meme ironically superimposed the image of the «dark lord» onto the figure of the president.

In fact, the mechanism of this meme is more complex and multifaceted than in most other examples in the selection. «Dark Brandon» [87] originated in right-wing online communities as a mockery of Biden, but was «recaptured» by left-wing and liberal users. They began to use the same image with ironic admiration and turned it into a symbol of the president's unexpected competence. This is a great example of what Jenkins [2006] describes as participatory culture. The author does not fix the meaning of the meme, but the community itself constantly redefines it. From the perspective of intertextual theory, «Dark Brandon» [87] demonstrates a phenomenon that Kristeva [1980] described as «transformation.» The text quotes a precedent figure, but the main thing is that it radically transforms its meaning by changing the context. The image of Palpatine in the original context of Star Wars is clearly negative. Within the framework of memetic irony, it acquires an ambivalent and even positive connotation, as «dark» power is reinterpreted as a sign of determination and strength.

The rhetorical function of the meme is primarily to construct a new ethos for Biden. The popular narrative previously portrayed him as a weak, sleepy and incompetent leader (reinforced by the «Sleepy Joe» [103] memes). Now he has a

counter-narrative. Biden is now portrayed as a hidden strategist who acts with cold calculation. It is quite telling that this counter-narrative proved effective precisely because of its ironic nature. It did not initially require the audience to seriously believe in the president's «dark power.» Instead, it offered ironic identification, which is a characteristic feature of internet humour.

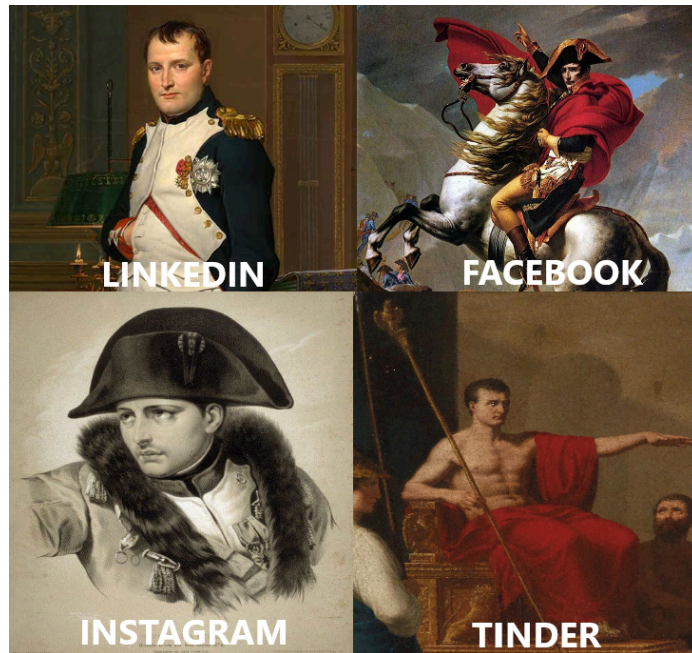


Figure 3.12. Meta-commentary on digital self-presentation in «Napoleon Profiles» [99]

The historical figure of Napoleon is in the political meme «Napoleon Profiles» [99] (**Fig. 3.12**). This meme compares Napoleon Bonaparte's profiles on various social media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder) with the slogan «Napoleon can do it all». It is a subtle example of using a historical figure to offer a meta-commentary on the contemporary culture of digital self-presentation. Napoleon is a historical archetype connoting boundless ambition and power. He is a strategic genius, yet in popular culture, he is also inextricably linked to the concept of the «Napoleonic complex».

The rhetorical effectiveness of this meme lies in its dissonance. The meme engages in an ironic interplay with «high art». In doing so, it draws on classical paintings (such as Jacques-Louis David's «Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass»). Each social media platform «imposes» a specific mode of behaviour on Napoleon. On LinkedIn, he appears as a professional, on Tinder as a seducer, and on Instagram as a stylised image. In the context of digital culture, a politician or public figure (even a historical one) becomes a construct that constantly adapts to the demands of the audience. The manipulative effect lies in demythologisation, as a great historical figure is transformed into a «digital commodity».

The meme compels the viewer to ironically rethink their own online behaviour, where individuals are similarly forced to fragment their identity and become hostages to digital masks. Here, Napoleon appears not as a real ruler, but as a «floating signifier», whose image can be endlessly recombined to comment on contemporary everyday life.



Figure 3.13. Aesthetic delegitimation through the distortion of the «Mona Lisa» image [97]

The appropriation of an artistic archetype is in the «Maga Lisa» [97] badge (**Fig. 3.13**). The use of Leonardo da Vinci's «Mona Lisa» as a precedent is an attempt to transfer the authority of the global cultural canon into the realm of political discourse. The badge, which contrasts the canonical ideal of beauty and harmony with its grotesquely distorted version («Maga Lisa»), functions as an instrument of aesthetic delegitimisation.

Here, a conflict arises between two semiotic fields. The «Mona Lisa» is the embodiment of classical harmony, mystery and timeless value. The distortion of this image («Maga Lisa»), with its emphasis on exaggerated lips and distorted facial features, directly appeals to stereotypes about plastic surgery and the «vulgarity» of political opponents. This meme does not merely mock; it discredits. By portraying the visual ugliness of supporters of a particular political movement, it seeks to impose the conclusion of their cultural and moral «inferiority».

As an object of material culture (a badge), this meme extends beyond the screen. When an individual wears such a badge, they signal their affiliation with an intellectual elite that «understands art» and despises the «bad taste» of their opponents. Thus, discursive exclusion takes place. The aesthetic criterion becomes a tool for distinguishing between «civilised» and «uncivilised» political subjects. This is an extremely effective, yet at the same time highly polarising, means. It denies the opponent's right to cultural legitimacy. It criticises the opponent's politics and calls into question their very cultural belonging to the community of «bearers of values».



Figure 3.14. Evolution of «Pepe the Frog» into a culturally significant archetype [89]

«Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog» [89] (Fig. 3.14) is as a self-made precedent figure. This is a unique case in the sample, as Pepe is a precedent figure that was not borrowed from an existing cultural tradition. It was formed in the space of internet culture itself and only later acquired the status of a culturally significant archetype.

Originally, Pepe was a character from Matt Furie's webcomic *Boys' Club* (2005). He had no political meaning. However, in the process of memetic evolution, described by Shifman [2014] as cultural replication, the image of the frog acquired new connotations. Moreover, the meanings even underwent several waves of reinterpretation. Initially, Pepe was associated with the online subculture 4chan and, more broadly, with the ironic humour of internet outsiders. Later, in the context of the 2016 presidential campaign, the image was appropriated by far-right communities and began to be associated with xenophobic and racist narratives. So much so that in 2016, the Anti-Defamation League included Pepe in its list of hate symbols.

This process is a striking illustration of how a precedent-setting figure can undergo a radical semiotic transformation. Moreover, this happened not because of the author's decision, but because of the decentralised practices of the community. The character's creator, Matt Furie, publicly distanced himself from the far-right use of his character and even symbolically «killed» him in one of the comic book issues. However, the memetic figure continued its independent existence. This demonstrated that precedent figures in internet culture can completely break away from their original source and live by their own rules.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, «Pepe» is an example of how a neutral symbol can become a tool for shaping group identity and stigmatising «outsiders». Van Dijk [2015] describes this mechanism as «symbolic exclusion,» when a cultural sign is used to mark the boundaries between «us» and «them.» Recognition of the symbol becomes a test of group membership. Those who truly understand its current connotations are «insiders,» while everyone else is an «outsider.»

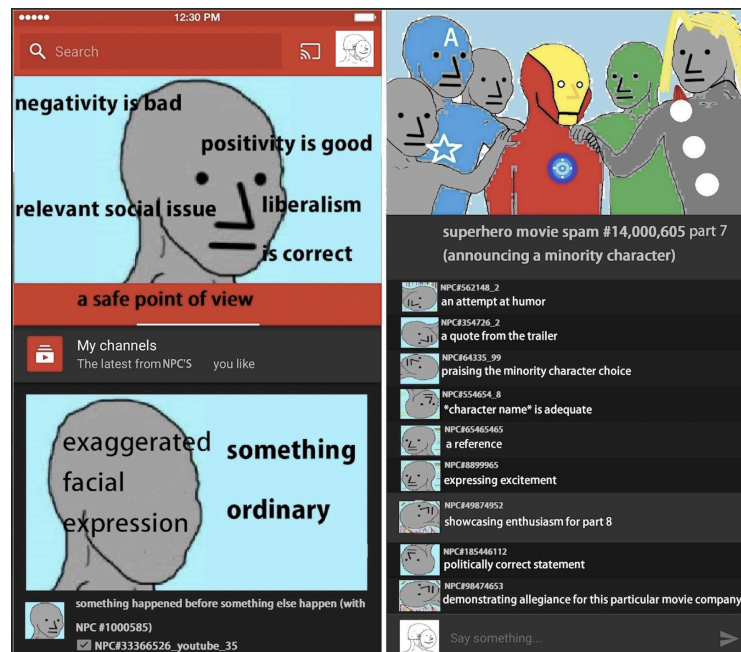


Figure 3.15. Dehumanisation of opponents through the «NPC» digital archetype

[101]

There is an example of a digital archetype as a tool of dehumanisation is the NPC meme [101] (**Fig. 3.15**) (Non-Player Character). The meme is another example of a precedent figure that emerged not from traditional cultural heritage, but from the space of digital culture, in particular from video games. A non-player character in video games is a secondary character with pre-written lines. They are incapable of independent thought and are doomed to repeat the same actions regardless of context. This characteristic became the basis for a powerful political metaphor.

In the memetic space, the image of NPCs was used to depict political opponents. First and foremost, this applied to supporters of left-wing views in right-wing online communities. They were considered people without their own opinions, who mechanically reproduced «programmed» media narratives. Visually, the meme depicts human figures with grey, expressionless faces instead of real faces. This is a characteristic feature of computer NPCs.

If the meme is analysed through the prism of critical discourse analysis, «NPC meme» [101] is the most blatant example of dehumanisation in the sample. Van Dijk [2015] describes dehumanisation as an extreme form of discursive exclusion. This lowers the psychological barrier to aggression towards «others.» The meme deprives opponents of signs of genuine thought and subjectivity and excludes them from full-fledged political discussion. There is no longer any need to argue with them, as they are a priori incapable of independent thought. This is an example of how a precedent figure from the entertainment context of video games can be recoded into a powerful tool of political manipulation.

It is telling that the choice of this particular figure is symptomatic of the audience that uses it. Appealing to video game culture signals belonging to a particular online subculture and simultaneously marks opponents as those who are outside that culture. Thus, the meme serves a dual function. It constructs a positive

identity for the «in-group» as thinking, ironic «players» and a negative identity for the «out-group» as soulless automatons.

3.1.4. Precedent utterances as verbal codes of political discourse

Memes in the latter category are the most linguistically specific. Their main carrier of meaning is not an image or situation, but a specific word or phrase. A specific phrase acquires the status of a culturally significant unit that is capable of independently activating a whole complex of meanings, emotions and social associations. Each time such a phrase is repeated or reproduced in a new context, it establishes a dialogue between the original situation and the current discourse. Analysis of five cases from the sample demonstrates different ways in which such precedence arises.



Figure 3.16. Use of the «I am the senate» quote to parody authoritarian claims [92]

«I am the senate» [92] (Fig. 3.16) is a rhetorical device to parody authoritarian claims. This meme is a striking example of how a well-known quote can be used to deliver political criticism. The quote originates from the science fiction saga «Star

Wars», where the character Palpatine, at the moment of his transformation into a dictator, proclaims: «I am the senate!». Political memes using this format often juxtapose statements by contemporary politicians who claim excessive power or sole control with this phrase. The meme functions as a precedent, transforming the quote from popular culture into a rhetorical shorthand that serves as a tool for mocking authoritarian ambitions, abuse of power, or political hyperbole.

The memetic power of this phrase lies in the audience's instant recognition of the ironic parallelism. In this scene, Palpatine embodies the destruction of democratic institutions and the usurpation of power. The use of his quote in relation to a contemporary politician, as illustrated by the example of Trump and the House of Representatives, is a form of discursive delegitimisation. A viewer familiar with the context of «Star Wars» instantly picks up on the subtext. The political figure in question is portrayed not as a democratic representative of the people, but as a dictator. He equates himself with a state institution.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis [Fairclough 1995], this meme serves the function of delegitimisation through rhetorical hyperbole. It does not require a detailed logical argument to prove that the politician is violating constitutional norms. Instead, labelling the figure as «Palpatine» automatically places them in the category of antagonists. This is a splendid example of how a pop-cultural text, acting as a precedent, is recoded into a «political weapon». The use of the phrase «I am the senate» creates an intertextual bridge, allowing the audience to perceive contemporary political manoeuvres through the prism of the familiar archetype of the struggle between good and evil. In this way, it radically simplifies political discourse to the level of easily digestible satire.



Figure 3.17. The «Let’s Go Brandon» euphemism as a performative act of belonging [96]

Euphemism is a political code in the meme «Let’s Go Brandon» [96] (Fig. 3.17) and a classic example of a precedent-setting statement. Now it is a political euphemism, a verbal code that is understandable to «insiders» and potentially opaque to «outsiders.» The phrase originated in October 2021 during a NASCAR race when tele-commentator Kelli Stavast heard the crowd chanting «F*ck Joe Biden.» She commented on it as «Let’s Go Brandon,» [96] in honour of race winner Brandon Brown. This conscious or unintentional redefinition instantly became a memetic phenomenon. The linguistic nature of this meme is extremely interesting from a semiotic point of view. «Let’s Go Brandon» [96] is an example of what Barthes [1957] described as a second-order myth. That is, it is a phrase that, at the level of denotation, is a neutral sports chant. But at the level of connotation, it carries an unambiguous political meaning for an audience that knows the context of its origin. This duality is key to the phrase's function as a euphemism. It effectively allows for the expression of strong antipathy towards the president in contexts where direct

profanity would be unacceptable, i.e. at official events, in the presence of children, on television and radio.

The rhetorical effectiveness of «Let's Go Brandon» [96] can be explained by several interrelated factors. First, the process of deciphering the code is a source of satisfaction for those «in the know.» It activates the mechanism of the so-called group advantage, described by Hobbes [2017]. Those who understand the hidden meaning feel intellectual superiority and a sense of community. Second, the phrase functions as a performative act of belonging. Its use is a kind of signal of ideological identification that is understood by members of the group. Third, the euphemism's protection from direct criticism gives it the character of a more «safe» form of political expression, because formally it is just a sports chant.

Critical discourse analysis shows that «Let's Go Brandon» [96] is an example of how language can be used to construct boundaries between groups. Van Dijk [2015] describes such mechanisms as «discursive exclusion.» The meme uses linguistic codes that are inaccessible to outsiders to strengthen group identity and foster solidarity. In this sense, the phrase functions not only as a political statement but also as a social ritual.

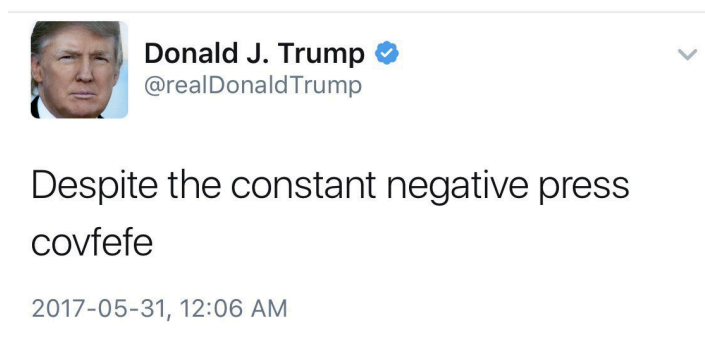


Figure 3.18. The original «covfefe» tweet as a precedent-setting utterance [86]

The error is a symbol in the «Covfefe» [86] (Fig. 3.18) meme, which is a unique case in this sample. This precedent-setting statement did not arise as a deliberate act of communication, but simply as an obvious mistake. On 31 May 2017,

Donald Trump posted an incomplete tweet on Twitter. «Despite the constant negative press covfefe». The word «covfefe» does not exist in any language. It is obviously the result of a typo or an unfinished sentence. The tweet was deleted a few hours later, but even before that, it had already been retweeted over 100,000 times.

The memetic potential of «Covfefe» [86] can be explained primarily by the theory of incongruity [Kant 2007; Schopenhauer 1969]. The comic effect arises from the sharp discrepancy between the status of the person who uttered the word (the President of the United States, who has access to the nuclear button) and the word itself (a meaningless set of letters). This discrepancy instantly activates the mechanism of superiority humour. The audience laughs at a person who holds the highest office in the world but cannot write a coherent tweet.

The comical nature of «Covfefe» [86] is really only the surface layer of its meaning. At a deeper level, the word has become a symbol of what Trump's critics considered to be the chaotic and unprofessional nature of his communication. Every subsequent use of the word «covfefe» activates this symbolic complex. It is like a metonymy for Trump's entire communication strategy, with its impulsiveness, mistakes, and even disregard for the conventions of official discourse.

It is quite telling that Trump himself responded to the public's reaction in his next tweet with the question: «Who can figure out the true meaning of «Covfefe»??? Enjoy.» In doing so, he attempted to redefine an obvious mistake as an intentional riddle. The attempt to fix everything is an example of a discursive struggle for the meaning of a precedent utterance. The author is trying to regain control over a symbol that has already gone beyond his control. The memetic audience did not accept this redefinition, and «Covfefe» [86] remained in the collective memory as a symbol of incompetence, and certainly not of mystery.

From a linguistic point of view, «covfefe» is a rare and striking example of a neologism. It arose from a mistake and gained a permanent place in the memetic lexicon. This demonstrates that any verbal phenomenon that appears at the right

moment in the right context and resonates with the mood of the audience can become a precedent. In other words, it is not just meaningful statements that can become memes.



Figure 3.19. The «Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV» sequence as a symbol of feigned competence [102]

The meme «Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV» [102] (**Fig. 3.19**) utilises the recitation of a simple list as pseudo-evidence of cognitive ability. It creates a stark contrast between the speaker's claim of intellectual superiority and the mundane nature of the words.

This case is structurally similar to «Covfefe» [86] but there is an important difference. While «Covfefe» [86] arose as an unintentional mistake, the sequence «Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV» [102] was uttered by Trump quite deliberately. This happened during a 2020 television interview as proof of his cognitive abilities. Trump described a cognitive function test that he allegedly passed with flying colours, even proudly quoting the sequence of words that had to be memorised.

The memetic potential of this statement lies in the striking discrepancy between the claim and the content. A person who claims to demonstrate exceptional intelligence triumphantly recites five extremely simple words. Such a discrepancy is a

classic source of humour according to the theory of incongruity, where expectations are not met in a grotesquely comical way. The audience, which was sceptical about Trump's cognitive abilities, found in this phrase a ready-made symbol to express their doubts. Moreover, the symbol came directly from the mouth of the subject of criticism himself.

In its memetic form, the phrase is reproduced in various contexts as an ironic marker of feigned competence. In fact, it is used to describe any situation where someone tries to impress and demonstrate minimal achievements with maximum pride. This shows that, like «Covfefe» [86], the statement has taken on a meaning that goes beyond the specific situation in which it originated and has become a generalised cultural symbol of a certain type of behaviour.



Figure 3.20. Combination of the Joker archetype and the «We Live in a Society» verbal unit [95]

Cynicism is a cultural code in «Joker / We Live in a Society» [95] (**Fig. 3.20**). This phrase in the meme is a particularly interesting case, as it combines the characteristics of a precedent utterance and a precedent figure at the same time. It is associated with the character of the Joker, an archetypal rebel against social norms.

At the same time, however, it functions as an independent verbal unit that can be used independently of the visual image of the character.

The origin of the phrase is quite characteristic of memetic culture. It arose as an ironic generalisation of complaints posted by users in online communities who were dissatisfied with various aspects of the social order. The phrase is seemingly incomplete – «We Live in a Society» – and without any explanation of what it means. This is its key rhetorical feature. It implies that the consequence is so obvious that it does not need to be articulated at all. Any social dysfunction is a natural result of the very fact of society's existence.

The phrase functions rhetorically by appealing to the pathos of cynicism and disillusionment, emotions that are particularly prevalent among young urban audiences. They feel alienated from institutions and norms. This makes it an effective tool to express diffuse discontent without a specific political target. Unlike most of the memes discussed, «Joker / We Live in a Society» [95] does not attack a specific politician or ideology, but only expresses general scepticism about the social order as such.

It is this vagueness that is both the strength and limitation of the phrase as a political memetic tool. On the one hand, it is extremely flexible and can be applied to any situation of social injustice or absurdity. On the other hand, the absence of a specific addressee makes it impossible to mobilise around a specific political position. In other words, this meme is closest to the category of meta-commentary, because it comments on the nature of society in general, rather than the specific actions of specific actors.

After a comparative analysis of the cases considered, several patterns can be identified that characterise the mechanism of precedent utterances in political memes. For example, all statements arose at a time of heightened public attention and were recorded in the media space before the start of their memetic spread. The condition for an utterance to become a precedent is its initial public visibility, i.e. the presence

of witnesses to the event who are willing to become transmitters. Also, most of the statements considered are aphoristically short and easily reproducible. This confirms Dawkins' observation [2006] that memetic fitness depends on the accuracy of reproduction. The exception is «Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV» [102]. The sequence is longer, but it compensates for this with the absurd comedy of its content.

It is also worth noting that in all cases, the precedent utterance functions as a marker of group identity. Its use or understanding signals belonging to a particular community and is a form of social action, i.e., not just a communicative act [Shifman 2014].

Finally, it should be noted that the cases considered demonstrate different ways in which precedence arises: accidental redefinition («Let's Go Brandon»[96]), a linguistic error («Covfefe» [86]), self-presentation as proof of competence («Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV» [102]) and diffuse cultural cynicism («Joker / We Live in a Society» [95]). This shows that precedence is determined not by the formal characteristics of a statement, but by the context of its reception, i.e. the audience's willingness to fill a verbal sign with symbolic meaning.

3.2. Patterns of Persuasion and Manipulation: Synthesis of the Analysis Results

After the examination of four categories of intertextual references in political memes, the transition can now be made from describing individual types to identifying cross-cutting patterns. These patterns permeate the entire corpus of memes studied, regardless of their intertextual category. It is these patterns that answer the central question of the study: how does humour function as a tool of persuasion and manipulation in political discourse? Analysis of the sample allows us to identify three systemic mechanisms that are common to memes in all four categories: the mechanism of cognitive simplification through intertextual

recognisability, the mechanism of emotional displacement of the rational, and the mechanism of constructing group identity.

3.2.1. Cognitive simplification through intertextual recognisability

The first cross-cutting pattern that unites memes in all four categories is the operation of radically simplifying complex political phenomena by translating them into the realm of the already known. In Chapter 1, it was established that conceptual metaphor is a fundamental mechanism of human thinking. It translates the abstract into the concrete [Lakoff, Johnson 2003]. Analysis of the sample shows that memes systematically and purposefully exploit this mechanism.

Each of the four categories implements simplification in its own way. Precedent texts impose a ready-made narrative structure; for example, the complexity of a presidential campaign is reduced to a four-panel logic of a «plan with unexpected consequences.» Precedent situations archetype, because the ideological choice between economic systems is reduced to a love triangle. Precedent figures symbolise that a multidimensional political actor is now reduced to a set of archetypal connotations. The latter, i.e. precedent utterances, metonymise. An entire system of views is compressed into a single word.

The manipulative potential of this pattern lies in the fact that simplification inevitably involves a certain distortion. The «I Did That!» [93] meme reduces the global problem of inflation to the actions of one person. The same mechanism can be seen in the meme «I am the senate» [92], where complex legal and political debates regarding the overreach of executive power and the separation of powers are reduced to a single pop-culture quote. This rhetorical shorthand allows the audience to instantly classify a politician's actions as «authoritarian». It effectively bypasses the need for in-depth constitutional analysis.

The «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] meme presents a complex ideological choice as natural and even obvious. In both cases, simplification is not only cognitively

convenient but also ideologically advantageous. It imposes a specific frame that complicates alternative interpretations [Fairclough 1995]. This is where cognitive simplification turns into manipulation.

This pattern also explains why memes are particularly effective in social media environments with a low attention span. In the one to three seconds that a user spends viewing a post, it is simply impossible to grasp a detailed argument. However, it is quite possible to recognise a familiar image and react to it emotionally. Thus, intertextuality is a pragmatic adaptation of memetic communication to the conditions of the digital media environment.

3.2.2. Replacing rationality with emotion: humour as a rhetorical weapon

The systematic replacement of rational argumentation with emotional influence through humour is the second systemic pattern. Analysis of the entire sample showed that none of the 20 memes studied offers a full logical argument in support of its position. Instead, almost all of them use humour as their main means of persuasion, which is where their rhetorical effectiveness lies.

As already noted in Chapter 1, humour is an effective means of circumventing critical thinking. When laughing, the audience is in a state of reduced cognitive alertness. Ideological content is absorbed without the activation of critical analysis. Moreover, the analysis of the sample confirms this theoretical conclusion with specific material and allows us to refine it somewhat. Different types of intertextual references activate different mechanisms of humour, but they all aim to achieve the same rhetorical effect.

Memes based on precedent texts most often use the humour of incongruity. The comic effect arises mainly from the clash between serious political content and a frivolous media format. «Gru's Plan» [99] is a good example here, as the four-panel structure of a children's cartoon and the theme of the presidential election create

incongruity. This makes it impossible to perceive the message as a serious argument. That is why it is accepted without critical resistance.

Memes based on precedent situations add humour of recognition. The audience laughs when they recognise a familiar everyday scenario in an abstract political situation. «Distracted Boyfriend» [88] is effective not because it convinces with arguments, but because it elicits a smile of recognition. And with it, a willingness to agree with the frame.

Memes based on precedent figures use the humour of ironic redefinition, which is particularly evident in «Dark Brandon» [87]. This ironic distance allows the audience to identify with the message without committing to believing it seriously.

Memes based on previous statements appeal to «insider humour». Only those who know the «secret» laugh, and that is the point. This reinforces identification with the message.

Particular attention is drawn to the humour of superiority [Hobbes 2017]. This is the dominant mechanism in memes of a delegitimising nature. For example, ridiculing an opponent by portraying them as incompetent, «Sleepy Joe» [103] or the nonsensical «Covfefe» [86]. Moreover, this is not only an entertaining act, but also a discursive operation of lowering status.

The «Maga Lisa» [97] meme further illustrates the use of aesthetic delegitimation to foster a sense of superiority. The meme's creator has distorted a masterpiece of high art, whilst encouraging the audience to view their political opponents as a «grotesque» distortion of cultural values. In this case, the emotional reaction serves as entertainment and a form of aesthetic and moral contempt, functioning as a powerful tool for social distancing from the out-group («outsiders»).

The person being laughed at loses authority in the eyes of the audience. This effect is more persistent than direct criticism. It is impossible to logically prove that something is not funny.

3.2.3. Constructing group identity and polarising discourse

The third systemic pattern is that political memes, regardless of their intertextual category, systematically perform the function of constructing group identity. They convey information, express positions, mark belonging, strengthen intra-group ties, and construct the image of «the Other.»

This mechanism is implemented through several interrelated strategies. The first is a strategy of shared knowledge, i.e., the meme requires a certain cultural or intertextual background to be understood. Thus, it automatically divides the audience into those who «understand» and those who do not. Understanding the sign is precisely a sign of belonging to the community. This is particularly evident in memes with precedent utterances. «Let's Go Brandon» [96] is understandable only to those who know the context of its origin, and this is what makes it an effective marker of group identity.

The second strategy is to construct an image of «the other.» Virtually every political meme in the sample contains a clear «us/them» opposition. «They» are endowed with negative characteristics: incompetence («Gru's Plan» [91]), irrationality («Woman Yelling At a Cat» [107]), greed or indifference to people («I Did That!» [93]). This mechanism corresponds to what van Dijk [2015] describes as an «ideological square,» i.e., emphasising the positive qualities of the in-group and the negative qualities of the out-group. The meme does not simply criticise the opponent but constructs them as fundamentally different, dangerous or ridiculous. Therefore, not worthy of serious consideration.

The third strategy is ritual dissemination as an act of group participation. Shifman [2014] emphasises that in memetic culture, the act of reposting or remixing is a communicative and social act. When a user spreads a meme, they publicly declare their position and invite other members of the group to show solidarity. Thus, memes function as digital rituals of group identification, similar to how shared songs or slogans performed this function in traditional political culture.

The combination of these three strategies leads to a systemic effect of deepening political polarisation. Memes reflect existing divisions and actively reproduce and deepen them. Each act of spreading a political meme only reinforces the idea that the political space is divided into two irreconcilable camps. Each camp has its own cultural grammar, its own symbols and its own narratives. This corresponds to what media researchers describe as «echo chambers,» i.e., information environments where users are predominantly exposed to content that confirms their existing views [Sunstein 2017].

Conclusions to Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, a systematic analysis of intertextual mechanisms of persuasion and manipulation was conducted in a corpus of 20 political memes. They were classified into four types of intertextual references: precedent texts, precedent situations, precedent figures, and precedent utterances.

The analysis showed that each of the four categories implements a common rhetorical strategy in the form of activating the cultural memory of the audience, but through different mechanisms. Precedent texts primarily import ready-made narrative structures and connotations from mass culture. Precedent situations appeal to archetypal human scenarios and make the abstract concrete and personal. Precedent figures activate symbolic archetypes that are saturated with stable cultural meanings. Precedent utterances function as verbal codes that mark group affiliation and activate memories of key events.

The synthesis of the analysis results revealed three cross-cutting patterns that characterise the functioning of humour as a tool of persuasion and manipulation in political memes. First, all memes perform cognitive simplification by translating complex phenomena into familiar terms. Second, humour systematically displaces rational argumentation and creates a state of reduced cognitive vigilance, where ideological premises are assimilated without critical analysis. Third, memes construct group identity through mechanisms of shared knowledge, the image of the «other» and ritual dissemination. This systematically deepens political polarisation.

All these patterns indicate that political memes are not just entertainment content. In fact, they are full-fledged discursive tools that play a significant role in shaping the political views of the modern audience. Their power lies precisely in the combination of accessibility and ideological richness. They are simple enough to spread instantly and complex enough in their intertextual load to have a profound impact on the audience's consciousness.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

This Master's thesis presents a comprehensive study of the linguistic dynamics of political memes as tools of persuasion and manipulation in English-language digital discourse for the last 10 years. The research synthesises approaches from linguistics, semiotics, and political communication and deconstructs the mechanisms through which multimodal texts influence public consciousness

The following systemic conclusions summarise the findings of each stage of the study:

1. Theoretical re-evaluation of the memetic genre.

The analysis of the evolution of scholarly thought has demonstrated a fundamental paradigm shift in the understanding of the meme. It has moved from Richard Dawkins' original biological metaphor of a «self-replicating unit of culture» to a complex multimodal communicative genre. This study substantiates that in the contemporary digital environment, the meme has acquired an ontological status as a primary tool for the «massification» of society. It has been established that the functional success of a political meme is determined not by its truthfulness or rational depth, but by its «replicative fitness», a combination of virality, emotional resonance, and speed of dissemination. The research confirms that memes act as «cultural replicators» that do not merely reflect political reality but actively construct it through participatory digital practices.

2. Synthesis of intertextuality and memetic grammar.

The theoretical investigation into the intertextual nature of memes revealed that they function as a «mosaic of quotations», as conceptualised by J. Kristeva. A key finding of the research is the substantiation of «memetic grammar», a system of stable visual and narrative formats that structure the perception of political events. Due to the integration of Western theories (L. Shifman, N. Fairclough) with the Ukrainian linguistic tradition (O. Selivanova, V. Rizun), the thesis proves that memes

operate through «cultural scripts». These scripts allow for the instant activation of an audience's background knowledge through a mere hint or allusion. It has been demonstrated that intertextuality is a constitutive condition. A meme only exists at the moment when the audience recognises and decodes the pre-existing cultural «traces» within it.

3. Validation of the three-level analytical model.

A significant methodological contribution of this thesis is the development and testing of the author's research model based on Speech Act Theory. The application of this model to the experimental base (100 memes) proved its high effectiveness in the deconstruction of manipulative strategies.

- 1) The *locutionary level* analysis enabled a detailed examination of the semantic-semiotic structure. It identifies how visual «anchors» and verbal components interact to create a coherent message.
- 2) The *illocutionary level* analysis revealed the pragmatic force of the memes. It moves beyond their surface meaning to identify their true intent: to mobilise, to ridicule, or to delegitimise.
- 3) The *perlocutionary level* assessment focused on the intended effect on the audience. It demonstrates how memes transform ideological stances into objects of emotional contagion.

The study confirms that the «hidden» pragmatic aim of most political memes is the transformation of a politician's ethos or the construction of a simplified binary worldview.

4. Typology of precedent phenomena and their rhetorical function.

The empirical classification of intertextual references in the research sample revealed four dominant groups that serve as the engines of memetic persuasion:

- 1) *Precedent texts*: Borrowings from mass culture (films, cartoons) that import ready-made narrative structures (e.g., «Gru's Plan» [91]). It allows complex political strategies to be viewed through the lens of familiar fictional tropes.

- 2) *Precedent situations*: Archetypal scenarios (e.g., the «love triangle» in «Distracted Boyfriend» [88]) that ground abstract ideological choices in universal human experiences. It ensures high cross-cultural appeal and rapid assimilation.
- 3) *Precedent figures*: Symbolic icons (from historical figures like Napoleon to digital archetypes like Pepe the Frog or NPCs) that serve as semiotic shorthand for complex sets of values or character traits.
- 4) *Precedent utterances*: Verbal codes (e.g., «Covfefe» [86], «Let's Go Brandon» [96]) that function as markers of group identity. They often operate as euphemisms or «echoic mentions» that signal shared dissent.

5. Mechanisms of cognitive simplification and emotional substitution.

The synthesis of patterns of persuasion identified a central mechanism: «cognitive simplification.» Memes systematically reduce multifaceted socio-political or economic crises to the level of personal blame or mundane irony. The research established that humour in this process serves as a «rhetorical weapon.» Through the mechanism of «benign violation» of norms, humour disarms the audience's critical faculties. It lowers the threshold for the internalisation of manipulative attitudes. Memes function as «rhetorical enthymemes», abbreviated syllogisms that invite the viewer to complete the logical chain themselves. This active involvement of the viewer in the creation of the argument leads to a powerful «illusion of personal conviction». It makes the manipulative influence significantly more resilient to factual counter-arguments.

6. Social dimension and the intensification of polarisation.

The study demonstrates that memetic communication is a primary factor in the formation of «information cocoons» and «echo chambers.» Memes function as social rituals that mark the boundaries of the «in-group» through the use of hermetic codes and shared intertextual knowledge. Simultaneously, they aggressively construct an image of the «out-group» as irrational, absurd, or even sub-human (as seen in the

«NPC meme» [101] analysis). This process deepens social polarisation. It replaces democratic dialogue with symbolic warfare, where the opponent is ridiculed and excluded from the discursive space.

7. Professional implications and prospects for further inquiry.

The findings of this thesis have significant utility for several professional fields within the contemporary communicative landscape:

1) *For political consultancy and public relations:* The identified patterns of intertextuality and memetic grammar offer a framework for the «optimisation of meme-production». Understanding the «memetic potential» of political statements allows for the creation of persistent symbols (e.g., «Dark Brandon» [87]) that can bypass traditional media resistance and achieve high organic reach. Future research should focus on the strategic engineering of memes to build or rehabilitate a politician's ethos in real-time.

2) *For media analysts and experts:* The proposed three-level model provides a systematic tool for monitoring digital discourse and deconstructing hidden ideological influences, particularly during sensitive periods such as election cycles or international crises.

3) *For media education:* The developed typology of precedent phenomena serves as a basis for programs aimed at developing critical thinking, teaching audiences to recognise the intertextual templates used to mask manipulative strategies.

In conclusion, the linguistic dynamics of political memes represent a defining factor of the modern media landscape. This research confirms that in the era of digital participatory culture, visual imagery and intertextual allusions have become more effective than rational text. It marks a transition toward a «post-literate» form of political engagement where emotion and recognition take precedence over evidence and debate.

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93. I Did That! [The President no Longer Controls Gas Prices]. 2026. URL : <https://www.facebook.com/groups/trxckwrlD/posts/1576849054148064/>.
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95. Joker / We Live in a Society [A i tak wybiorą kolejnego nudnego prezydenta]. 2021. URL : <https://memy.jeja.pl/tag/joker,12>.
96. Let's Go Brandon [Trump Jr Let's Go Brandon]. 2022. URL : <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2217472-lets-go-brandon>.
97. Maga Lisa [Work of Art vs Work of Horror]. 2026 URL : https://www.threads.com/@ronan_the_golden.
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104. This is Fine [The full six panels of On Fire show a dog named Question Hound becoming engulfed by the flames he opts to ignore]. 2023. URL : <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/this-is-fine-meme-anniversary-1.6713594>.
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APPENDICES

It should be noted that the following categorisation of memetic material is not exhaustive, as many units possess characteristics of multiple functional groups due to their inherent polysemy and multimodality. For the purposes of this research and analytical clarity, each meme is assigned to a specific category based on its dominant pragmatic function identified in the sample.

Appendix A. Category 1: Ideological Criticism (20)

1. American Chopper Argument. 2025. URL :
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1088453656639099&set=a.476190064532131&id=100064234233950>.

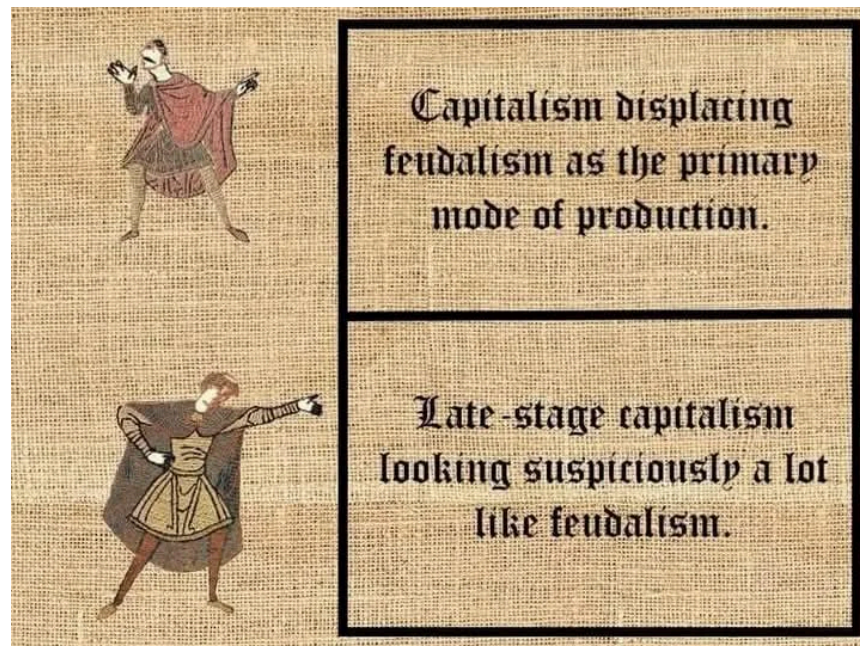


2. Baby Yoda / Grogu ["Confused You Are?"]. 2023. URL :

<https://makeameme.org/meme/confused-you-are-283cdc2368>



3. Capitalism and Feudalism. 2025. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/CommunismMemes/comments/1il9zdw/capitalism_and_feudalism/.



4. Corporate Needs You to Find the Differences [They're the same picture]. 2025.

URL

:

https://www.reddit.com/r/TheMatpatEffect/comments/1lo98y8/the_theyre_the_same_picture_meme_is_about_two/.



5. Distracted Boyfriend [100-page Monograph on Distracted Boyfriend]. 2024.

URL

:

<https://howtodothingswithmemes.substack.com/p/100-page-monograph-on-distracted>



6. Equity Card (Star Trek / NDP Convention) [NDP convention]. 2026. URL : <https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/4683286/NDP-convention?refGallery=tags&page=1&tag=political+memes>.



7. Free Market Competition [The “Free” Market]. 2024. URL : <https://www.memerevolt.net/4062/the-free-market>.



8. Free Market Economics? [“FREE MARKET ECONOMICS?”]. 2022. URL : <https://makeameme.org/meme/free-market-economics-a57fcfb56c>.



9. Government Budget (The Office) [Government moment]. 2026. URL : <https://www.memedroid.com/search?query=politics>.



10. Mocking Spongebob. 2023. URL :
<https://medium.com/@lab1122/mocking-spongebob-analyzed-d22904fcd614>.



Danyelita
@DaniLevyvy

Americans: I need healthcare because I have cancer and I'm dying

Republicans: I NeEd hEaLtHcArE bEcAuSe I hAvE caNcEr aNd iM dYinG



11. Morpheus / What If I Told You [What if i told you Gaza is the last Free human city on Earth]. 2023. URL :
<https://api.memes.com/m/what-if-i-told-you-gaza-is-the-last-free-human-9yRePNJ3OBd>.

WHAT IF I TOLD YOU GAZA IS THE LAST
FREE HUMAN CITY ON EARTH



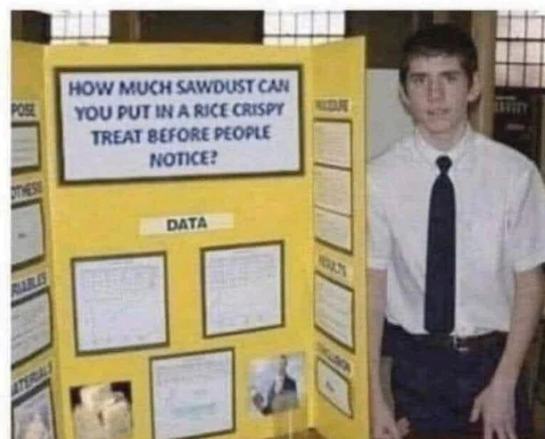
12. Political Compass (Avatar: The Last Airbender) [Political Compass Meme from Avatar]. 2020. URL : <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1689121-political-compass>.



13. Rice Crispy / Sawdust ["How much?"]. 2020. URL : <https://it.memedroid.com/memes/detail/2991718/How-much/>.

Libertarians: The free market
will regulate itself!

Corporations:



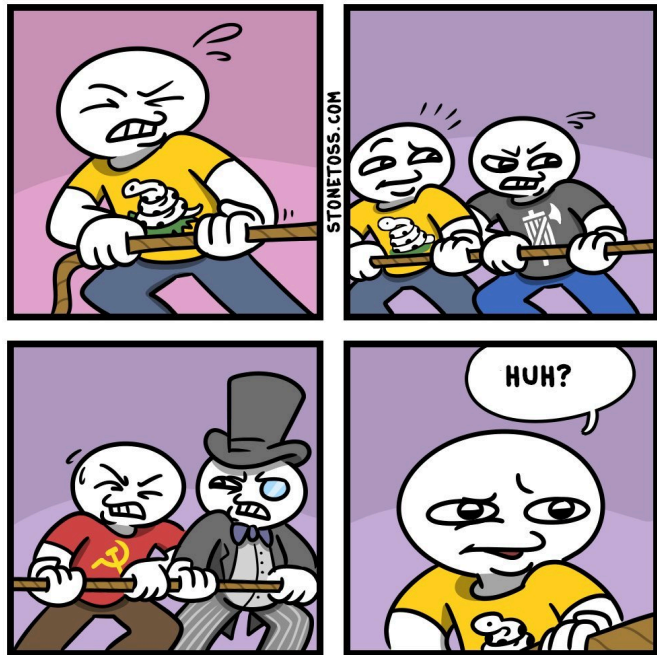
14. Social Credit Score China [SoCS meme on China's teenage gaming time limits]. 2019. URL :

<https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/memes-social-credit-score-system>.

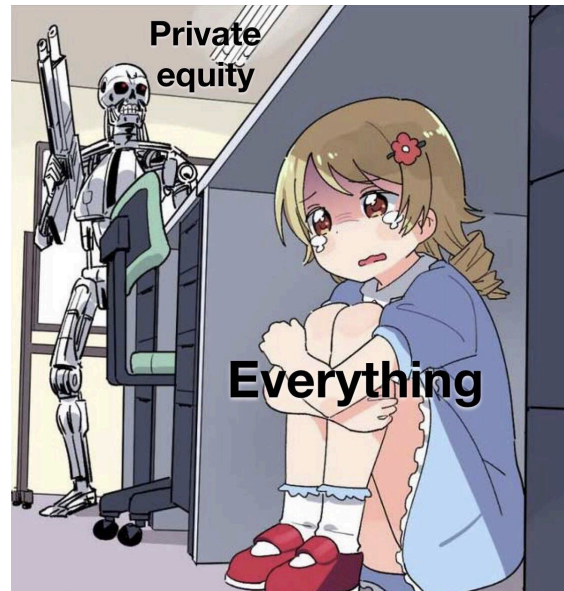


15. Stonetoss Tug-of-War ["HUH?"]. 2018. URL :

<https://it.memedroid.com/memes/detail/2479504/HUH>.



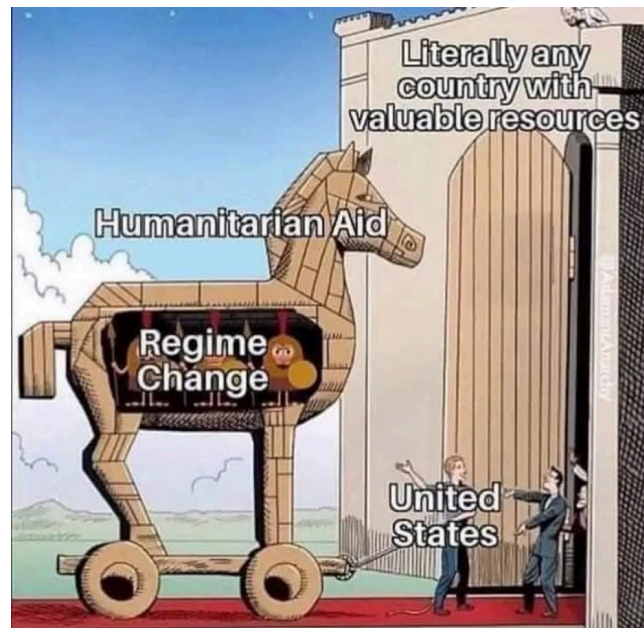
16. Terminator vs Anime Girl [Private Equity Meme]. 2025. URL : https://www.linkedin.com/posts/deborahbeckwin_this-is-the-first-time-a-meme-has-made-me-activity-7206777311839281152-Hf13.



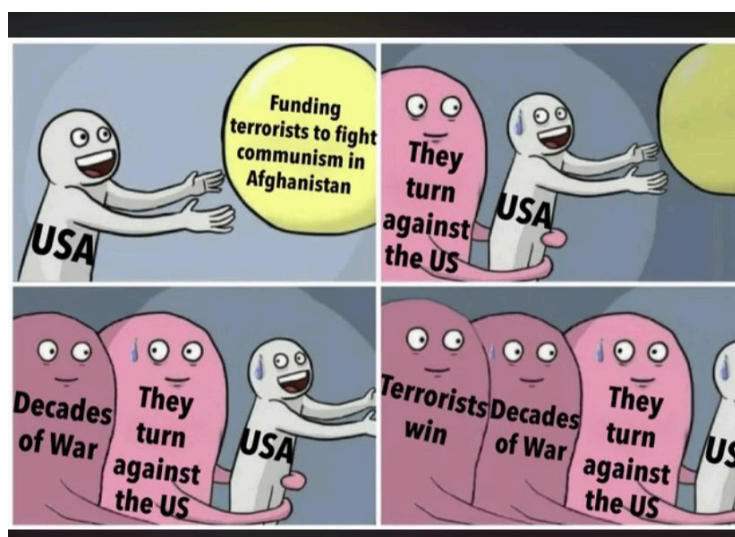
17. Titanic Spending Logic [Meanwhile in backwards land U.S]. 2024. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/ClassConscienceMemes/comments/1e6b960/meanwhile_in_backwards_land_us/.



18. Trojan Horse [Regime Change]. 2025. URL : <https://www.threads.com/@jimdiljes/post/DQuFurPCcM2/some-of-these-memes-are-really-old-so-i-guess-there-wasnt-an-imaginary-drug>.



19. USA Problem Creation (Pink Blob) [The USA tries not to create its own problems that it is incapable of solving challenge (impossible)]. 2024. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/Marxism_Memes/comments/layg1bk/usa_tries_not_to_create_its_own_problems_that_it/.



20. Virgin vs Chad [Virgin Militaristic Puritan VS Chad Democratic Leviathan].

2021.

URL

:

https://www.reddit.com/r/TNOmod/comments/ktd9sa/virgin_militaristic_puritan_vs_chad_democratic/.

Virgin Militarist Puritan



Chad Democratic Leviathan



Appendix B. Category 2: Personal Satire (20)

1. Bernie Sanders Asking for Financial Support [Dank Bernie Sanders Meme That Want Your Financial Support; Aragorn visits Rohan parody]. 2025. URL : <https://cheezburger.com/10398981/dank-bernie-sanders-memes-that-want-your-financial-support>.

Aragorn visits Rohan after failing
to create an effective tax policy



2. Bernie Sanders Mittens Meme. 2021. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/malefashionadvice/comments/12fh6f/bernie_sanders_mittens_won_the_inauguration_fit/.



3. Covfefe [“Covfefe”]. 2019. URL :
<https://www.newsweek.com/volfefe-index-trump-tweets-1458308>.



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump



Despite the constant negative press
covfefe

2017-05-31, 12:06 AM

4. Dance for Me. [Trump and Musk AI Art]. 2024. URL :
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/antiquanonmemes/posts/1772176906657320/>



5. Dark Brandon. 2022. URL :
<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2417093-dark-brandon>.



6. Dogs Leave Springfield Ohio After The Debate. 2024. URL : https://www.instagram.com/p/C_yfvLPSEJB/.

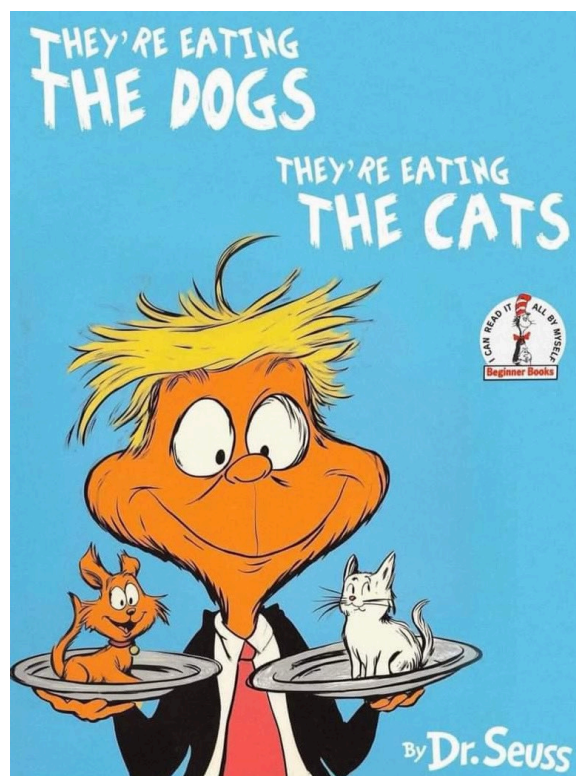


7. Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog [Donald Trump retweeting a memetic reimagining of him as Pepe the Frog]. 2023. URL : <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/b-A-screenshot-of-Donald-Trump-retw>

[eeting-a-memetic-reimagining-of-him-as-Pepe-the-Frog_fig2_372941101.](#)



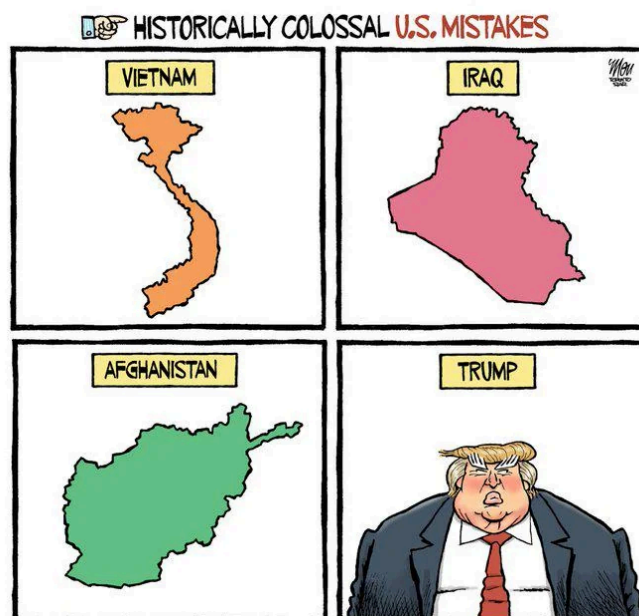
8. Eating Cats, a Small Seussian Story. 2024. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/KamalaHarris/comments/1fevmik/eating_cats_a_small_seussian_story/.



9. Fear No War [Epstein vs Trump edit]. 2026. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalMemes/comments/1sh4x74/fear_no_war/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.



10. Four of the Worst Mistakes in Recent US History. 2026. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalMemes/comments/1sgbhno/four_of_the_worst_mistakes_in_recent_us_history/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.



11. JD Though. 2026 [Dune / Baron Harkonnen Trump parody]. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalMemes/comments/1s1sfo4/jd_though/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.



12. Justin Trudeau's Handshake With Donald Trump [My Little Pony edit]. 2017. URL : <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1222264-justin-trudeaus-handshake-with-donald-trump>.



President Trump explaining to Prime Minister Trudeau how surprisingly fulfilling it is being a brony...

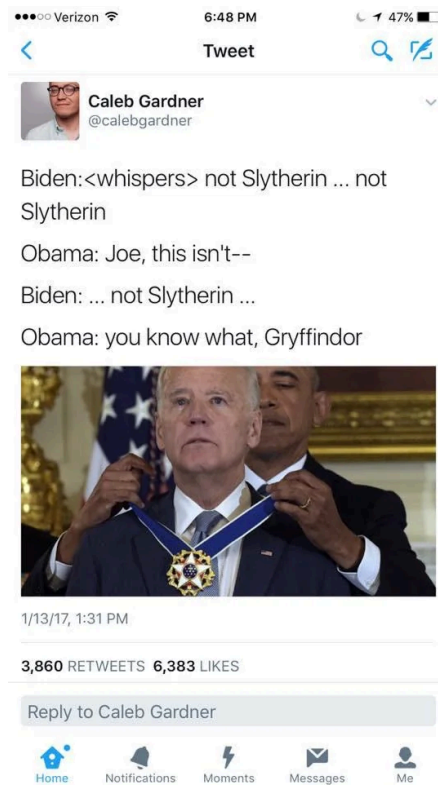
13. Lord Rishi Announcing His Plans for Mandatory National Service [Shrek Lord Farquaad Parody / National Service]. 2024. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/BritishMemes/comments/1d2dhgr/lord_rishi_announcing_his_plans_for_mandatory/.



14. Maya Rudolph as Kamala Harris [Maya Rudolph as VP Kamala Harris through the 2024 Presidential Election]. 2024. URL : <https://x.com/bleedingcool/status/1818668721252217033>.



15. Not Slytherin, not Slytherin [Obama and Biden edit]. 2017. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/harrypotter/comments/5nv4n6/not_slytherin_not_slytherin/.



16. Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV ["Person. Woman. Man. Camera. TV"]. 2020. URL : <https://forums.sailinganarchy.com/threads/trump-presidency-part-2.248804/page-743>.



17. Queen of the Condescending Applause [Nancy Pelosi Clapping]. 2019. URL : <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6673169/Nancy-Pelosi-sparks-meme-frenzy-sarcastic-applause-Trumps-State-Union-address.html>.



18. Scott Evil [Scott Evil, Austin Powers: Goldmember]. 2026. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalMemes/comments/lsgxcur/scott_evil_austin_powers_goldmember/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.



19. Stop the Count. 2020 [Trump and Count von Count edit] URL :
https://imgur.com/t/person_woman_man_camera_tv.



20. Truly the Two Greatest Generals in History [Veni Vidi Vici vs I Came I Saw I Ran]. 2026. URL :
https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalMemes/comments/1sg1qjm/truly_the_two_greatest_generals_in_history/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.



Appendix C. Category 3: Delegitimisation (20)

1. Boris Johnson Fridge ["DON'T HIDE IN THE FRIDGE!"]. 2019. URL : <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dont-hide-fridge-alex-bottomley>.



2. But her emails!. 2025. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/facepalm/comments/1jiy98t/but_her_emails/.

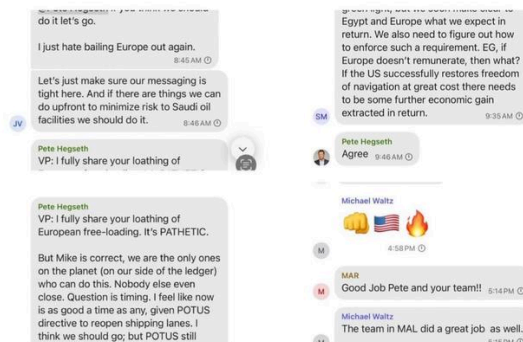


Angry Staffer ✓
@Angry_Staffer

Most of the Cabinet and Trump's senior national security team were coordinating strikes on Yemen in a *signal chat* and nobody noticed they accidentally added a reporter.

Really unbelievable shit here.

But her emails, right?



19:21 · 24/03/2025 · 107K Views

3. Bye Bye Bidens. 2021. URL : <https://imgflip.com/i/4jnclp>.



4. Cancun Cruz. 2021. URL : <https://www.digitalmomblog.com/ted-cruz-memes/>.



The Lincoln Project
@ProjectLincoln

Doesn't look like Ted is going to get to hang out with his friends after all. Sad. #CancunCruz

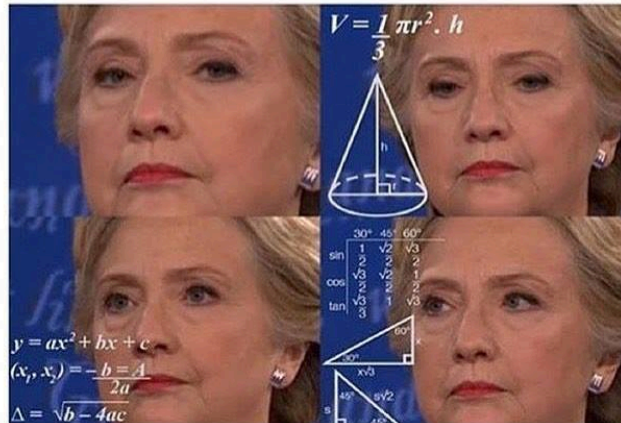


Ted Cruz

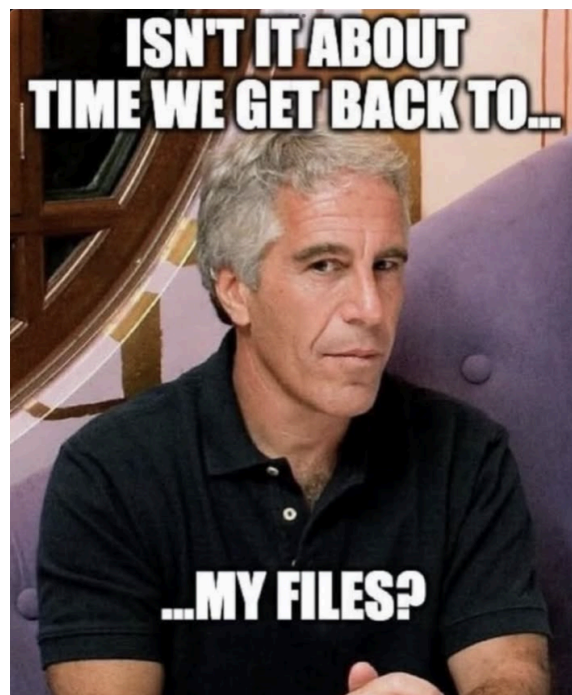
10:25 AM · Feb 18, 2021 · Twitter Web App

5. Confused Hillary Clinton [Hillary Clinton Confused]. 2019. URL : <https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/2595993/Apparently-everything-I-post-is-wEeB-tRaSh-so-heres-some-more>.

When you're trying to figure out how you lost a rigged election but you accidentally deleted the email with the full details of the plan



6. Epstein Files [...MY FILES?]. 2026. URL : https://www.threads.com/@trumps_a_moron/post/DWFVFrvFjKz/that-time-of-day-keep-reposting-release-the-files-untedacted.



7. Freezing Mitch McConnell [The Shining parody]. 2023. URL : <https://www.guide4moms.com/2023/08/collection-of-freezing-mitch-mcconnell-memes.html>.

Nobody.

Mitch McConnell:



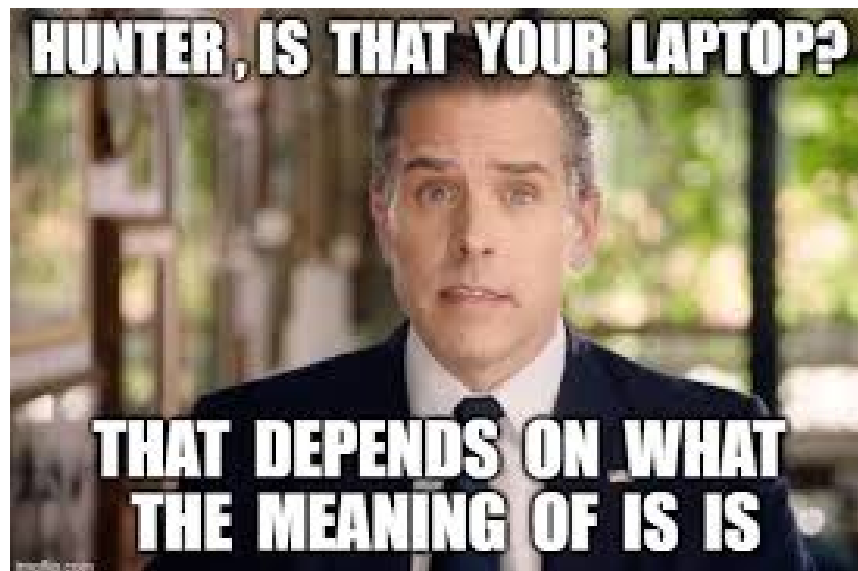
8. Gru's Plan [Running for President]. 2018. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/83x8cl/running_for_president/.



9. Hillary Clinton Pokemon Go Joke [Cringey Hillary Clinton Pokemon Go Joke]. 2016. URL : <https://share.google/ARF17U3Y9KSL6Yho8>.



10. Hunter Biden Laptop [That depends on what the meaning of "is" is]. 2021. URL : <https://imgflip.com/i/4jhxtg>.



11. I am the senate. 2019. URL :

<https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/2837259/Sorta>



12. I Did That! [The President no Longer Controls Gas Prices]. 2026. URL :

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/trxckwrlld/posts/1576849054148064/>.



13. Kamala Harris is Speaking [Fire background]. 2025. URL : <https://www.facebook.com/groups/318595405472890/posts/1821645255167890/>.



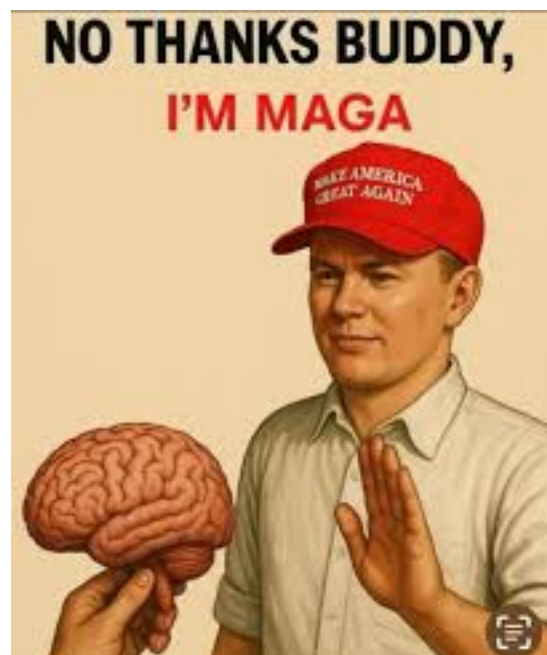
14. Maga Lisa [Work of Art vs Work of Horror]. 2026 URL : https://www.threads.com/@ronan_the_golden.



15. National Trash Day [Trump in a dumpster]. 2024. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/MarchAgainstNazis/comments/1f81yxa/national_trash_day/.



16. No Thanks Buddy, I'm MAGA ["No thanks, buddy, I'm MAGA"]. 2025. URL : <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJaJEXkyhvz/>.



17. Ron DeSantis' White Boots. 2022. URL :
<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2454254-ron-desantis-white-boots>.



Ken Olin
@kenolin1

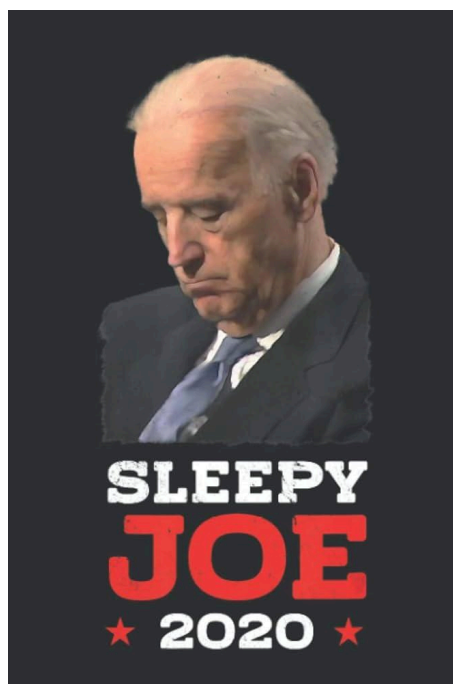
...

And this is the guy who made it illegal to say gay...
And, scene.



11:13 PM · Oct 4, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

18. Sleepy Joe Biden [Sleepy Joe]. 2025. URL :
https://www.reddit.com/r/WayOfTheBern/comments/1nups74/exclusive_unearthed_biden_note_cards_reveal_he/.



19. Trump Word Salad Cartoon [She's Got Nothing]. 2024. URL: https://www.reddit.com/r/conservativecartoons/comments/1g76iha/shes_got_nothing/



20. When Virtue Signaling Goes Wrong [AOC Met Gala Dress]. 2021. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/enoughpetersonspam/comments/poaugf/aocs_dress_s_hould_have_said_eat_the_rich_thats/.

AOC wears a "Tax The Rich" dress at Met Gala , where a ticket costs \$30,000 to attend



Appendix D. Category 4: Metacommentary (20)

1. Auth-Right Soros Obsession [Auth-Right has an unhealthy obsession with George Soros]. 2022. URL : https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalCompassMemes/comments/t5j9rn/authright_has_an_unhealthy_obsession_with_george/.



2. Expanding Brain. 2018. URL : <https://imgflip.com/i/213msz>.



3. Is This a Pigeon? (Is This Communism?) [Laaaaaaaaaaaaazy]. 2020. URL : <https://imgflip.com/i/3qar2k>.



4. Joker / We Live in a Society [A i tak wybiorą kolejnego nudnego prezydenta]. 2021. URL : <https://memy.jeja.pl/tag,joker,12>.



5. Military Operation or Terrorism Chart [Military Operation or Terrorism]. 2026.

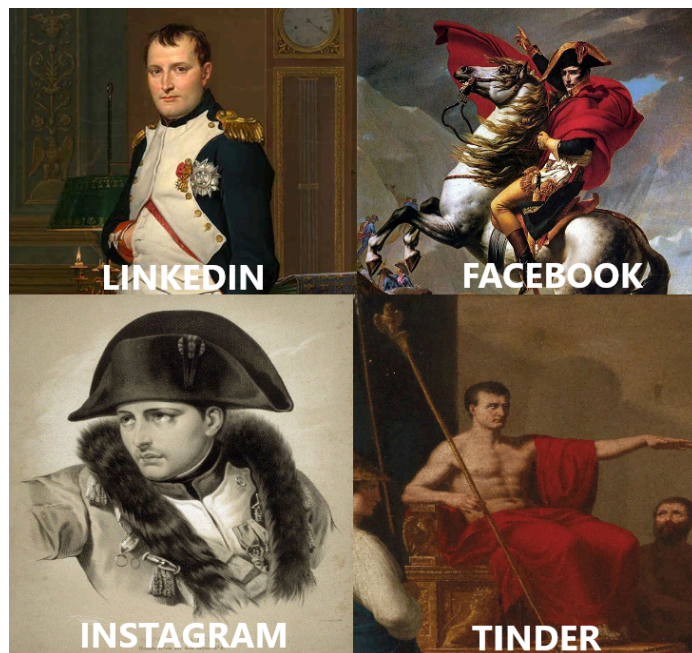
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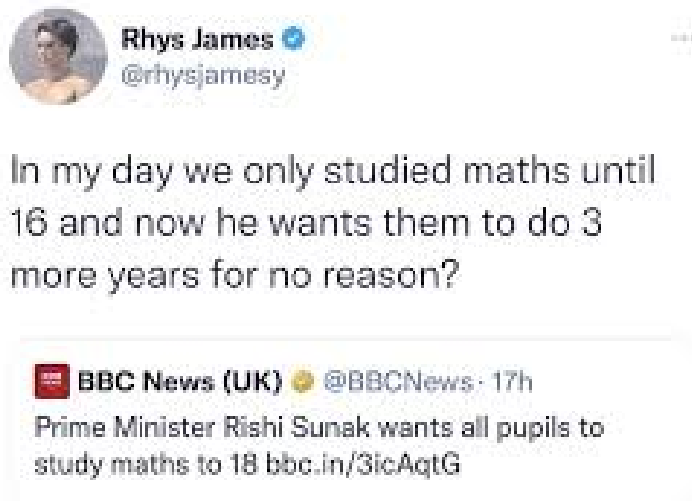
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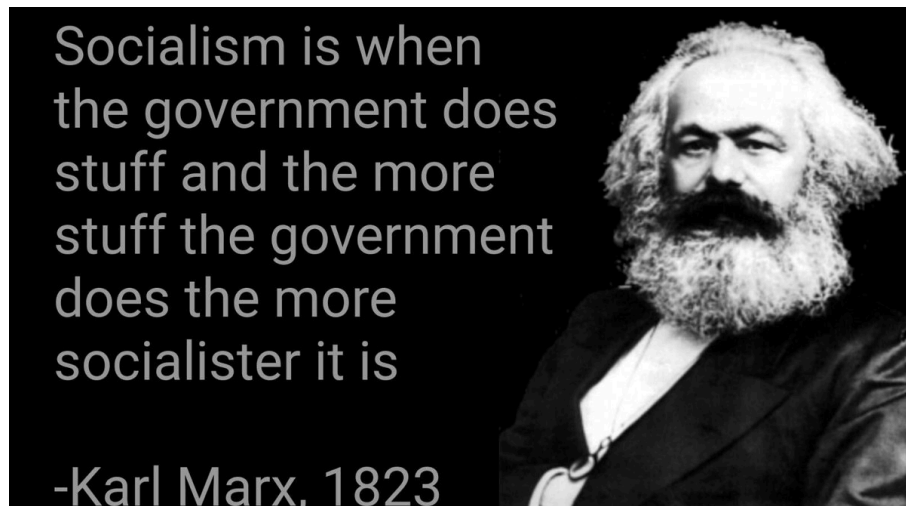
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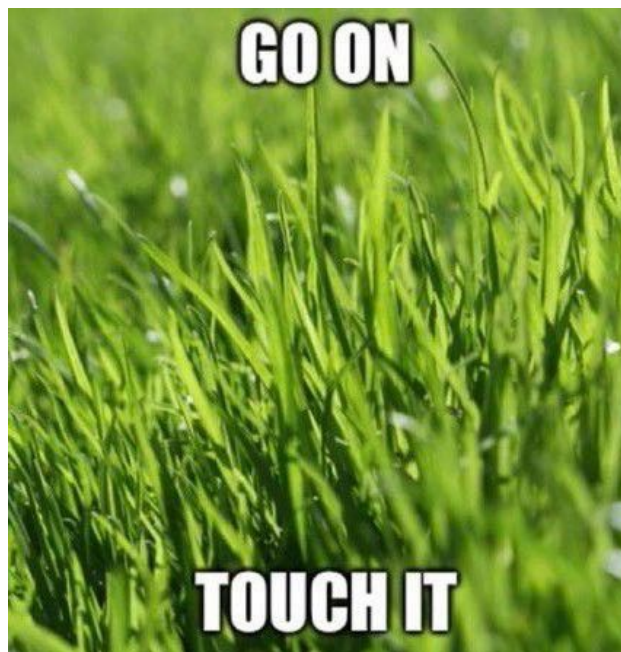
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Leftist
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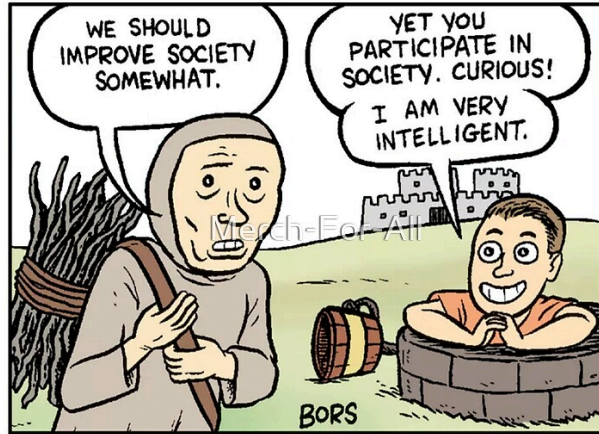
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screaming political ideology i don't like political ideology i do like



Appendix E. Category 5: Emotional Mobilisation (20)

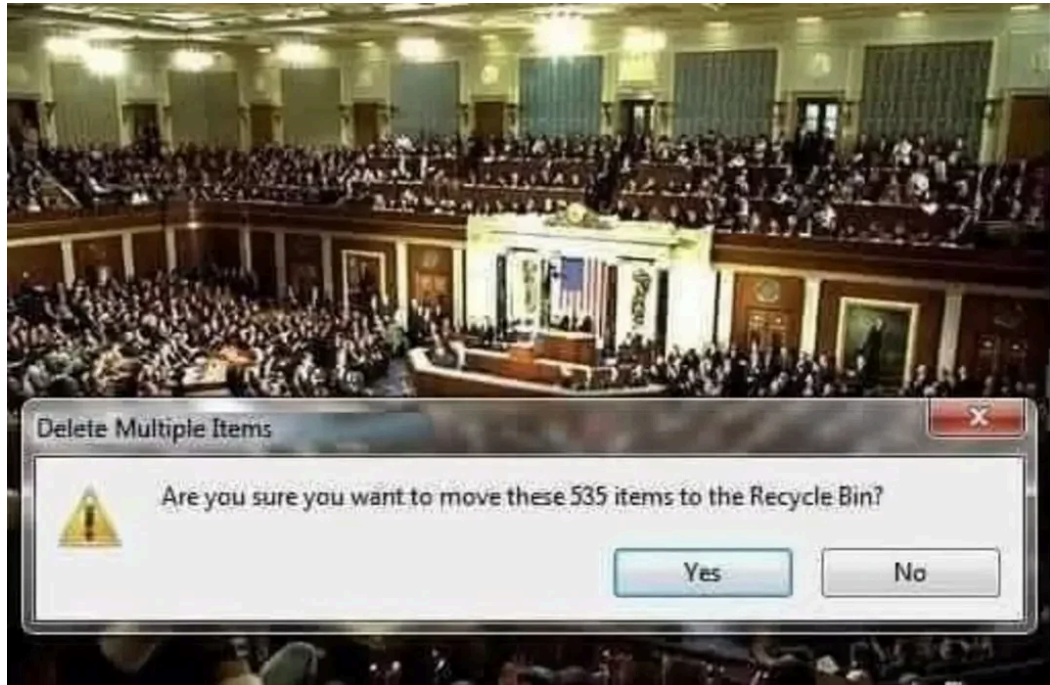
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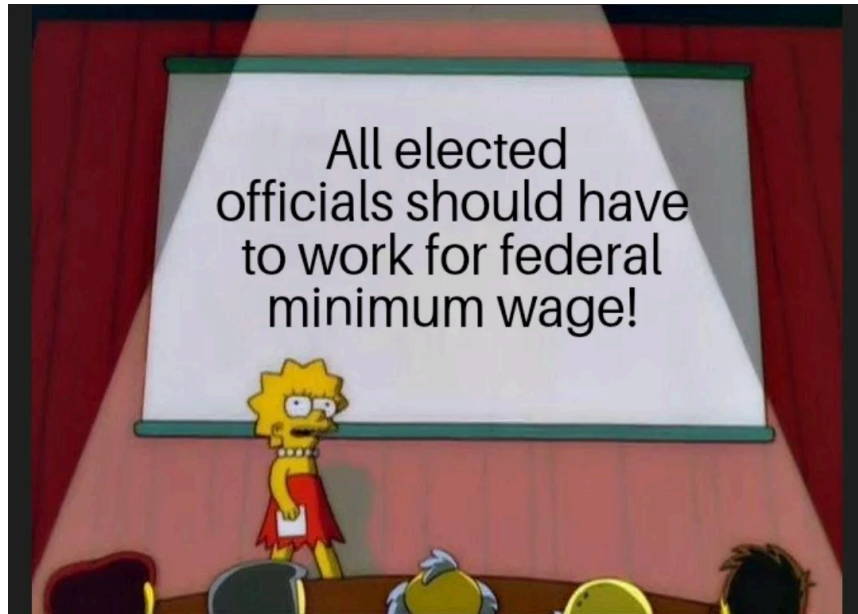
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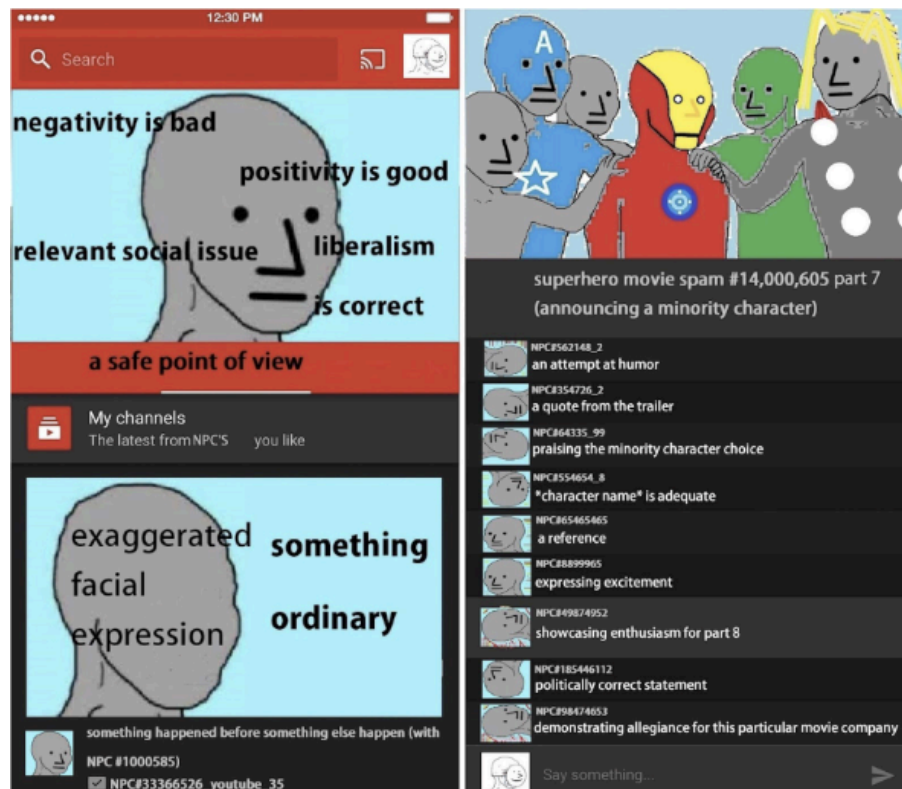


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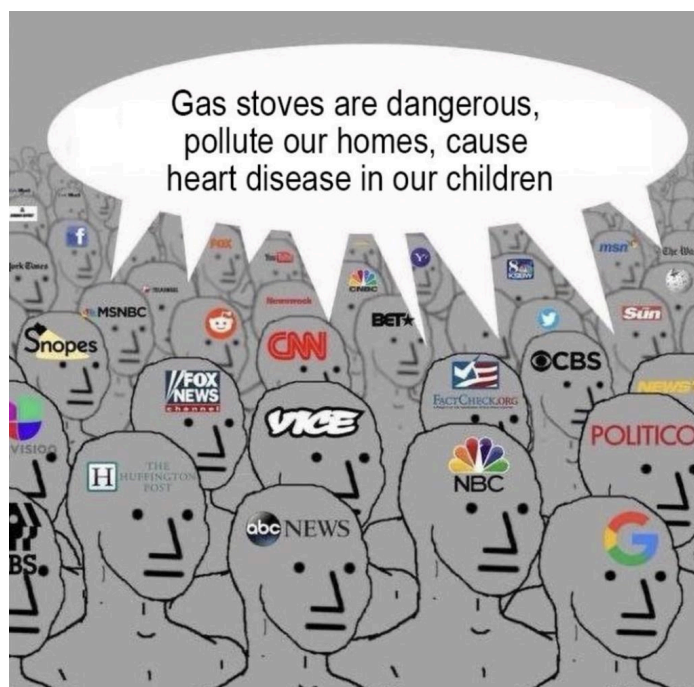


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AMERICAN WORK FORCE:
WE DON'T NEED NO UNIONS!

CORPORATE OVERLORDS:
OH, I GUESS WE'LL PAY YOU SHIT! YAY!!



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