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Political-electoral memes and interactional humour on Twitter

Ana Pano Alamán – Ana Mancera Rueda

Abstract: This chapter presents the results of a qualitative study of a corpus of replies to humoristic memes, which were published and viralised on Twitter during the Spanish general elections campaign held on November 2019. Based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour and on its adaptation to multimodal humour, this study aims at establishing whether and how memes made up of a single image or a combination of an image and a caption may generate humorous effects on the imagined audience on Twitter and encourage responses that entail continued humour. The results show that most of the memes analysed convey recognition, understanding, appreciation, and agreement among Twitter users, whose responses express laughter using different multimodal affordances, or replicate the humorous contents of the meme by producing new memes. Moreover, humour created by these memes enables producer users and recipients to challenge the political power, while nurturing in-group solidarity.

Keywords: memes, Twitter, electoral campaign, interactional humour, multimodality, Spain

1. Introduction

On the 10th of November 2019 Spaniards went to the ballot box for the third time in a year, having voted in the General elections on the 28th of April. Since December 2015 they had been called four times in as many years - December 2015, June 2016, April, and November 2019 - to choose their parliamentary representatives. In the pre-electoral

General elections 2019, social networks were the second most used media by the public to “inform themselves about political issues and the electoral campaign” (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2019). According to statistical studies, even though the number of users of the microblog - 4.1 million in Spain (The Social Media Family, 2021)¹ - is far less than that of its competitors - 22 million on Facebook and 20 million on Instagram -, Twitter has far more influence in politics and in the media (Mancera Rueda and Pano Alamán, 2013, 2020). Indeed, most users are firstly, institutions and politicians, who by means of condensed and fragmented speeches (Pano Alamán, 2019), attempt to promote their political agenda and mobilise their potential voters. However, Twitter contributes to promote a “pseudo political discourse”, which is characterised by personalisation, the deideologisation of the public, and the spectacularisation of information (Gallardo Paúls and Enguix Oliver, 2016).

This study aims at exploring pseudo political discourse on Twitter during the 10th of November Spanish General elections, throughout a qualitative analysis of memes that have been viralised in the microblog. Our goal is to see whether memes are employed by Twitter users’ to show distance from a determined candidate, or to mobilise voters, contributing to generate a “framework of participation” (Dynel and Chovanec, 2015; Mancera Rueda, 2019) and to encourage interactional humour.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Memes

The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in his monograph *The selfish gene* (1979). In keeping with this evolutionary biology, the meme is a “unit of cultural

¹ Report available at <<https://thesocialmediafamily.com/informe-redes-sociales/>>. Retrieved: 23-05-2021

transmission or one of imitation”. In other words, it is an idea or behaviour, which spreads from person to person at the heart of a determined culture, in the same way as genes and viruses usually do. The Internet “appropriated” the term “meme” in the nineties, when people started to use it to refer to a series of videos and images accompanied by a short text with a marked and white typography (Mancera Rueda and Pano Alamán, 2020). In accordance with Marino (2015), memes are characterised by their expressive syncretic contents, which result from a process of intervening in pre-existing texts. Moreover, they are imbued with a collectively allocated and recognised efficiency on account of their playful intention, the anonymity of the creator, and their repetitive, appropriative and participative dissemination (Blackmore, 1999; Milner, 2012; Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2015; Kanai, 2016, among others). On the other hand, research based on the *Theory of Relevance* (Yus Ramos, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021) states that the essential function of memes is building a collective identity. Indeed, they have become a communicative, daily, and universal communication code (Shifman, 2013), covering different topics. Moreover, these are perceived as “feel-good pills, in so far as they are brief humorous *stimuli* whose aim is to elicit laughter” (Ballesteros Doncel, 2016: 23), as well as to relativise and keep at a distance eventual conflict in politics (Yus Ramos, 2021). Indeed, “one of the visual traditions in which the meme is continuous is political satire” (Winckler, 2019: 3).

2.2. Political humor

Activism on social media is inspired by the tradition that engravings that circulated in Europe during the wars had as ideological and propaganda weapons (Pestarino and Winckler, 2018). In fact, political humour on the Internet helps to create and consolidate

a network of shared meanings, which strengthens the bonds of solidarity, presents contents in a fun format, and stimulates collective action (Shifman, 2013; Tay, 2015).

As Tsakona and Popa put it:

Contemporary political humour owes much of its popularity to the media: most of the genres belonging to (or including) political humour are produced and/or disseminated via the media [...]. Even when such humour surfaces in non-prototypical humorous contexts (e.g., political, or parliamentary debates, political interviews, news reports, slogans, graffiti), it is often (re)framed and reinterpreted by the media (2013: 2).

For example, in the context of the Brazilian general elections in 2014, humorous memes were used on Twitter to comment on the debate and, in many cases, to make a vicious attack on the candidates (Chagas et al., 2019). Closer to the purpose of this work, Piata's study (2018) focuses on the interactive aspects of humour based on post-electoral memes on the Greek general elections in 2015, in combination with the responses given to these memes on Facebook. On the basis of the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH, Attardo 1994, 2001) and its adaptation to multimodal humour (Tsakona, 2009), Piata (2018) proves that memes constitute humorous representations of the attitudes that Facebook users have towards the elections results and to the main political candidates. These often encourage responses which convey *recognition, understanding, appreciation* and *agreement* (Hay, 2001) of humour with laughter; but most are "mimetic" responses which replicate the humorous contents of the meme, using the same image along with ironic, sarcastic or humorous utterances; or, less frequently, by producing new memes. Lastly, Piata's analysis (2018) indicates that the humour created in and by the memes has both a subversive and a reinforcing role, as it enables producer users and recipients to gather in the same space, a Facebook thread, to

challenge the political power and nurture in-group solidarity and “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna, 2011).

3. Description of corpus and methodological considerations

The present study has an exploratory, interpretative, and qualitative nature. Adopting a metapragmatic approach, it aims at identifying the sources of knowledge set out in the GTVH (Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Attardo, 2001), in order to see how humour works within a corpus of political-electoral memes published on Twitter and how recipients react to the memes in the microblog. The analysis takes into account the linguistic choices made by the producers of memes, as put forward by the research group GRIALE (Ruiz Gurillo, 2012, 2016, 2021; Ruiz Gurillo and Alvarado Ortega, 2013), and the memes’ multimodal humour elements (Tsakona, 2009).

The research has a focus on a corpus of 1314 “replies” of Twitter users to a collection of 120 humorous memes posted during the General elections held in Spain in November 2019. The following steps and criteria guided data gathering: 1) on the 10th of January 2020 we selected 25 hashtags (Table 1), which were inserted in tweets published in the period 1st-10th November 2019, assuming that hashtags constitute a fundamental tool for identifying the most discussed topics in a given period (Mancera Rueda and Pano Alamán, 2015); 2) we automatically extracted the tweets containing these hashtags using the Twitter’s API:

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1. List of hashtags included in the messages of the corpus.

3) from the “conversations” generated around these 25 hashtags we selected randomly 120 humorous memes; 4) finally, we extracted manually a total of 1314 tweets which were posted as “replies” to the 120 humoristic selected memes, in order to analyse the interactional humour (Norrick and Chiaro, 2009; Chovanec and Tsakona, 2018) within these messages.

In the memes of our corpus, humour does not come exclusively from the image, but from the link between it and the text of the tweet that comes with it. This image may be an audio-visual, or an animated GIF (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015), in which an excerpt from a film is produced over and over again. See Figure 1, for example, in response to the following statement: “Conservatives are the ones who conserve the environment”, made by Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, representative of the political party VOX, during the first electoral debate held on the 2nd of November. In this dynamic GIF the actor Jack Nicholson is shown, moving his arms in an emphatic gesture of denial:

INSERT FIG. 1 HERE

‘Conservatives are the ones who preserve the environment.
That’s like saying “I like Romanticism because I’m romantic”’

Figure 1. Tweet posted by @FilolCabreados. 01-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/FilolCabreados/status/1190397577591762945>>. Retrieved: 30-05-2021

Some of these memes may also contain a photograph which shows an event of importance in the electoral campaign, enabling the reference in the text to be identified. For instance, Figure 2 shows Albert Rivera, at that time leader of the party Ciudadanos, who is stroking a puppy (Figure 2). The recipient of the tweet is invited to recall the statement made by this politician who presented the animal as his “secret weapon” to win the most important electoral debate held on the 5th of November. Before the debate, Rivera said: “He still smells of milk, he is a baby. Whoever criticises me in a debate, you know, will have to face Lucas” (20 *Minutos*, 2019). Although these words are not

reproduced in the message, the photography implicitly recalls this utterance and activates another possible interpretation of the meaning given in the text to *leche* (milk). The meme plays with the ambiguity of this noun *leche* (milk), which is used in the tweet with the meaning of *trastazo* o *porrazo* (“bump, whack”), alluding to the electoral defeat of this party as it was foreseen in the polls:

INSERT FIG. 2 HERE

‘smells like milk from Barcelona, but really good milk’

Figure 2. Tweet posted by @4ng3IP. 10-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/4ng3IP/status/1193610251687342082>>. Retrieved: 30-05-2021

Although these memes do not have the prototypical structure of a meme with text superimposed onto an image which stands out in white typography, they have been included as well, since the text within the message and the embedded image complement each other. As Yus Ramos (2019a) states, when Internet users see a meme, they must carry out an inferential hypothesis to interpret both the text and the image, focusing on the role that they both have. Moreover, the election of these memes which elicit humour, is based on the taxonomy set out by Tsakona (2017), according to which memes may be classified into four genres in terms of their relationship with humour: a) those in which the humour constitutes a prototypical feature, and that are created with the aim of entertaining a certain audience (jokes, comic strips, comedy); b) those in which humour is an optional feature, albeit an expected one, as they frequently attempt to elicit a humorous effect (everyday interactions and certain literary texts); c) those in which humour is also optional, but not expected (journalism articles, parliamentary debates, political speeches); d) those in which humour is not prototypical, as it never or hardly ever appears (specialised texts).

A priori, it may be thought that in memes shared on social networks humour constitutes a prototypical feature, but in the corpus of this study, this is an optional element. In the “conversations” that revolve around the hashtags selected there are numerous memes in which the “humorous mode” does not appear (Attardo 2008; Partington 2006; Ruiz Gurillo 2019a). This is the case, for example, in the following tweet (Figure 3), the aim of which is to criticise the fake news spread by the Partido Popular (PP) party, whose leader - Pablo Casado - is shown in the image, without resorting to humour.

INSERT FIG. 3 HERE

‘This is certainly not a #FakeNew 🗨️ Impersonating a candidate with the aim of subverting the electoral process is an immorality within the reach of very few, but above all it is an action that can constitute an electoral crime. #PPCheater’

Figure 3. Tweet posted by @4ng3lP. 30-10-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/PGomezPerpinya/status/1189571568088895488>>. Retrieved: 30-05-2021

When considering humour within political memes, it is necessary to distinguish *humor competence* from *humor performance* (Attardo, 2001). The former concerns the capacity speakers and listeners have to make and recognise humour within a determined context, while the latter refers to the desire and willingness to appreciate it. Both concepts are related to the previously mentioned cognitive processes that humour may demand from the listener/reader (Hay, 2001): *recognition, understanding, appreciation* and *agreement*. The first two come under *humor competence*, since they are linked to the capacity the listener/reader has to recognise humour in a determined utterance and to understand it. The last two are related to *humor performance*, indeed, through appreciation listeners/readers give a positive evaluation of the humorous utterance, and through agreement, they show their approval of what is said or intended.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Qualitative analysis

Although out of the 120 humorous memes analysed, 43 of them did not receive any type of reply, all of them were retweeted and marked with “likes” by other Twitter users. This might be interpreted as an implicit display of recognition and appreciation of the intended humour within the message, but, at the same time, we may consider these reactions as phatic responses (Yus Ramos, 2019b). For example, (1) contains a meme that establishes an analogy between the leaders of the five political parties who participated in the 5th of November electoral debate and the protagonists of a well-known cartoon series. The meme was retweeted 22 times and received an average of 50 “likes” since the date of the extraction of tweets for this study (10th January 2020).

(1) INSERT EXAMPLE (1) HERE

‘From Albert Rivera’s show taking out objects in El Debate4N I’m going to make a thread showing the likeness between the characters in Doremon cartoons and politicians.’

Tweet posted by Maestro Sinape (@jagobapalacios). 06-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/jagobapalacios/status/1192023360722677763>>.
Retrieved: 02-06-2021

Occasionally, we have come across a succinct tweet, which includes the address of another Internet user. For example, in (2) the massive defeat in the elections for Ciudadanos was compared with the disastrous performance of a band whose lead singer falls from the stage ending up on fire:

(2) INSERT EXAMPLE (2) HERE

‘Connecting to the Ciudadanos headquarters.’

(2a) INSERT EXAMPLE (2a) HERE

‘Thanks for making me laugh. I see... and.... and they’re making my night’

Tweet and responses to them posted by Dios (@diostuitero). 10-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/diostuitero/status/1193610921488322560>>. Retrieved: 02-06-2021

As one can see in (2a), a Twitter user sends a reply tweet which is aimed at both the author of the message (@diostuitero) and another user (@aidixy). The latter replies to these tweet and thanks the meme producer recognising and appreciating the humorous message: “Thanks for making me laugh”. This kind of reactions nurture social relationships through humour. Replies may also include the mention (@profile) to managers of audio-visual entertainment programmes, which have sections in which they mention the funniest memes shared on social networks. As can be seen in (3), in the reply to the tweet which contains the meme about Albert Rivera, now the former leader of Ciudadanos, there are mentions to the Twitter profiles of the programmes *Late Night Show*, *La Resistencia* and *La vida moderna*, a humorous radio programme:

(3) INSERT EXAMPLE (3) HERE

‘Families don’t have any kids anymore because of this devil.’

Tweet published by @Hiervansson and reply by other users. 04-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/Hiervansson/status/1191474763379675138>>. Retrieved: 02-06-2021

The aim of mentioning these specific profiles is sharing content that the sender, @VelasquezOmar1 in this case, considers that may be of interest of TV programmes that usually comment the funniest memes about the elections. Other replies, such (3a), include manifest compliments (“Eres un crack”, “You are a whiz”):

(3a) INSERT EXAMPLE (3a) HERE

In (4), we observe the same photomontage used in (3), in which Albert Rivera holds a sex toy for women.

(4) INSERT EXAMPLE (4) HERE

‘And this, Mr Sánchez, is the main problem the Spaniards have. #ElectoralDebate’

Tweet posted by Anacleto Panceto (@Xuxipc). 04-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/Xuxipc/status/1191470389626593280>>. Retrieved: 02-06-2021

During the electoral debate, this candidate showed to the audience different objects in order to illustrate his arguments; these were a piece of a paving stone, photographs, graphs, a map of Spain, and a copy of the doctoral thesis of one of his opponents, among other things, which gave rise to a large number of humorous memes. The utterance which goes with the image reproduces in direct speech the words that Rivera may have said while showing this object, producing a script opposition. In accordance with the GTVH, in order to classify a text as humorous this needs to be based on two script oppositions. In this case, the image works as a script switch trigger (Raskin, 2008) by which in the mind of the tweet reader the deictic demonstrative *este* (“this”) and the noun phrase “el principal problema” (“the main problem”) takes on a new, sexual, apolitical meaning, in the same way as the noun *españoles* (“Spaniards”) abandons the neutral gender uttered by the Ciudadanos leader to refer solely to males. This resource and the inferential process which leads to the resolution of the incoherence represented here by the opposition between the object shown and the context of the electoral debate, elicits great laughter from Twitter users, who make several compliments to the meme too:

(4a) INSERT EXAMPLE (4a) HERE

‘This is the winning meme’

(4b) INSERT EXAMPLE (4b) HERE

‘The best thing I’ve seen on Twitter in a really long time.’

Compliments constitute a positive evaluation which credits their recipients (Holmes, 1988: 492) and are, therefore, a sign of approval (Vanderveken, 1990: 215), even in political interactions on Twitter (Pano Alamán, 2020). As regards memes, compliments can be interpreted as signs of recognition and acceptance of the humour that is expressed in them. This is also shown in the replies collected in the corpus, where compliments are expressed by means of colloquial verb phrases such as “me parto” (“I’m splitting my sides”) or “me meo” (“I’m pissing myself”):

(5) INSERT EXAMPLE (5) HERE

‘I’m so disappointed with the Backstreet Boys comeback.’

‘I’m splitting my sides’

‘hahahahaha I’m pissing myself’

Tweet and replies to them posted by @olaladefua. 04-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/olaladefua/status/1191460895957880832>>. Retrieved: 04-06-2021

As seen in the replies given, most of these types of messages include an emoji² which shows a face with a tear of joy. According to König (2019), this is related to the functions of laughter in face-to-face conversations, hence it is more recurrent in humorous interactions on Twitter. In the thread of replies to (5), very often users just respond with this emoji, with variations of it, or even with well-known GIFs that show famous people or unknown ones laughing. This “humorous thread” elicits more laughter, by accumulation.

² As stated by Yus Ramos (2021), emojis are carriers of non-propositional contents which help us to interpret the feelings or emotions that an Internet user wishes to transmit.

(5a) INSERT EXAMPLE (5a) HERE

In other replies, emojis may come with comments that help to broaden the humorous effect of the meme, as seen in (6):

(6) INSERT EXAMPLE (6) HERE

‘The leading couple of journalistic information... We’re in the money’

‘Newtral New TALK’

Tweet and replies to them posted by @ferreras2018. 05-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/ferreras2018/status/1191688391609503744>>. Retrieved: 04-06-2021

The interpretation of this meme is supported by the linguistic context and the shared knowledge among Twitter users concerning the ideological spectrum of the Spanish media. The hashtag #debatearv, which appears in the text of the tweet, was chosen by the TV channel La Sexta so that the programme audience could share their opinions on Twitter about the programme *Al rojo vivo*, whose abbreviated form is *arv*. The debate with the five candidates held on the 5th of November was broadcasted by this channel. The presenter of the ARV programme, Antonio Ferreras, who is married to Ana Pastor García –another well-known journalist on this channel–, appears in one of the photographs of the tweet (note the parodic profile name, *Perreras*, where the meme was posted). However, the woman who appears next to him is not his wife, but rather “another” Ana Pastor, in this case, Ana Pastor Julián, a member of the Partido Popular (a political party who Ferreras often criticises in his programme). The meaning of the noun phrase “el matrimonio líder de la información periodística” (“the couple leading journalistic information”) contrasts with the image contents, which makes the tweet reader draw conflicting conclusions, according to the typology of logical mechanisms used when interpreting humour (Attardo, Hempelmann and Di Maio, 2002). This is

supported by the contextual information with which Twitter users are assumed to be familiar with the Spanish media. In multimodal tweets such as this one, the semantic script usually coexists in the same discursive space³. In the reply sent to (6), following five emojis which heighten the act of laughing, two texts are juxtaposed: “Newtrall”, and “New” (by means of a symbol) and “Talk”. The former refers to the well-known start-up for detecting fake news founded by Ana Pastor García (Ferrerás’ wife) herself; the latter seems to make an ironical wordplay with “new” and “talk”.

Another reply to a meme, which produces humorous effects in this context, through the analogy between Pedro Saura, a member of the Partido Socialista (PSOE) and a ventriloquist puppet (7), contains an onomatopoeia. This element usually represents laughter, and its spelling seems to be reiterated in various messages in the corpus to express intensification.

(7) INSERT EXAMPLE (7) HERE

‘Which one is Pedro Saura? Photo 1 Photo 2’

‘Hahahahhahhah’

Tweet and replies to them posted by @vicentegomez77. 03-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/vicentegomez77/status/1190765877957922816>>. Retrieved: 04-06-2021

As mentioned, in the corpus of replies there are numerous GIFs which reproduce laughter. However, we find others that express surprise, such as the one with a girl who ostensibly moves her head from side to side, as seen in (8).

(8) INSERT EXAMPLE (8) HERE

‘It would be great if Malú had the other half of the paving stone’

³ Padilla García and Gironzetti (2012) analysed this aspect in the journalistic comic strips. Also, AUTHOR 1 (2019) studied the relationship between text and images within political tweets.

‘What?’

Tweet and replies to it posted by @Lalibretilla. 04-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/Lalibretilla/status/1191466361760948226>>. Retrieved: 05-06-2021

As Linares Bernabéu states (2020: 14), humour is a semantic and pragmatic phenomenon arising from a comic reality which is presented as something unexpected and is incoherent to the interlocutor. In this case, what surprises the Twitter user who reacts using this specific gif is the incoherence of associating the communicative situation that corresponds to the initial tweet image and text, that is, Rivera showing a broken paving stone, which makes reference to the violent aggressions that had taken place against the police in Catalonia, and the sentence “Sería muy bonito que Malú tuviera la otra mitad del adoquín” (“It would be great if Malú had the other half of the paving stone”), which activates an opposition script, since the utterance addressed to Malú, the partner of Rivera, has a romantic sense and, thus, it is very unlikely to be said in the context of an electoral debate.

Also, in the corpus GIFs have been found which are used to express agreement with the point of view shown in a meme. For example, in response to the meme produced in (3), which attributes the drop in the birth rate in Spain to the popularisation of a sex toy, a Twitter user responds with an audiovisual GIF in which the word “agreed” appears superimposed on a dynamic image where a man is nodding.

(9) INSERT EXAMPLE (9) HERE

Tweet posted by Idoia (@idoalvahi). 05-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/idoalvahi/status/1191494590689349633>>.
Retrieved: 05-06-2021

In accordance with Hay (2001) to be considered humorous, an utterance must also receive a certain degree of agreement, which is linked to the *humour performance* of the

recipient. Thus, agreement shown in the corpus with the content of a meme may either be expressed implicitly by reproducing laughter through emojis, GIF or symbols. In this case (8) a GIF has been modified by adding a text in which agreement is explicitly expressed.

On Twitter, but also in other social networks, it is frequent that users modify the contents of a message by adding new or reused multimodal contents (Tsakona, 2009). This is the case for most of the tweets analysed in this study. It must be recalled that the majority were published within the context of a political-electoral debate, which enabled Twitter users to display a certain attitude or to evaluate the political candidate throughout the publication and sharing of humorous tweets and memes; satirical memes and responses such as the one in (9) allowed users to show their political-ideological values and reinforcing the relationships inside the in-group (Pano Alamán, 2015; Piata, 2018). In this respect, this type of response is aimed at showing agreement with the author of the original meme, but also criticism towards the candidate.

For instance, in (10), the message suggests implicitly that Juan Carlos Girauta, the parliamentary spokesman for Ciudadanos and one of the main leaders of the electoral campaign within this political party, will be forced to resign after the predictable electoral defeat of his party; see his figure next to Rivera fading away. This is a point of view with which various Twitter users seem to agree on; they reply to this meme adopting irony and making *ad hominem* attacks, a personal abuse based on emotional arguments (Kienpointner, 2008). The ironic responses call into question his being a democratic politician and even a representative in the Parliament:

(10) INSERT EXAMPLE (10) HERE

‘I don’t want to leave, Mr Rivera... #GeneralElections10N #Elections10NL6’

‘Well, at last the “democrat” Girauta can take a break from his exhausting job of blocking tweets, because he’s a complete non-entity’

‘Who is Girauta?’

Tweet and responses to them posted by @Aquel_Coche. 10-11-2019:
<https://twitter.com/Aquel_Coche/status/1193641256318119936>. Retrieved: 06-06-2021

Some replies to political memes in the corpus contain acts of dissension (Brenes Peña, 2011). In these cases, users clearly disagree. In (11), one of the responses openly expresses disagreement towards a critical meme targeting the representative of the Partido Popular, Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, who participated in the first electoral debate of 1st November. This is rather a expression of *failed humour* (Bell, 2009), since the user rejects the satirical humour displayed in the original meme:

(11) INSERT EXAMPLE (11) HERE

‘Every time Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo opens her mouth this meme comes to mind
Migraine - Hypertension - Stress - Listening to Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo’

‘Well, I think the opposite. I love listening to her.’

Tweet and responses to them posted by @javiigrz. 01-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/javiigrz/status/1190381620685156354>>. Retrieved: 05-06-2021

In this example, disagreement is explicitly expressed. This reaction is also manifested by means of ironic utterances which may have a positive or negative effect on the social face of the irony target (Alvarado Ortega, 2005). In (12) an initial tweet contains a meme that, according to the election results, predicts: first, the dissemination of memes making fun of the failure of Ciudadanos, or hypothesizing the third election process in one year if the results make impossible to form a government; second, the need to flee to the Caribbean in the case the far-right party Vox wins the elections.

(12) INSERT EXAMPLE (12) HERE

‘#L6Ntotheballotvox #Elections10N #VotePlease #DemocracyParty #UnidasPodemos10N #MasPais10N
#Voting #VoteUnidasPodemos Everything ready for tonight

Memes in case Rivera has a really bad crash
Memes in case there is more blocking//3rd elections
Plane tickets to the Caribbean in case Vox wins'

'Damn those lefty democrats, all have enough cash to travel to the Caribbean
if someone they don't want wins'

Tweet and responses to them posted by @TuPanaFresco. 10-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/TuPanaFresco/status/1193461037665792000>>. Retrieved: 07-06-2021

This meme thereby helps to delegitimise the actions and the discourse of these two parties and of their voters, who are members of the user out-group (Van Dijk, 1997). Therefore, they are placed in the opposite electoral and ideological camp, as can be seen in some of the hashtags included in the tweet (#UnidasPodemos10N or #Vota UnidasPodemos). The tweet receives a reply in which the user manifests an ironical attitude expressing disagreement with author of the meme. He or she apparently shows surprise that "lefty democrats" voters, in which she or he includes the interlocutor, have enough money to go to the Caribbean if the electoral results are not to their liking. The author of the initial tweet responds to this ironic message with an animated GIF which is very popular in social networks. The gesture invites to infer that this group (the so-called "democratic left") and the author of the meme are indeed clever, or that his or her interlocutor should reflect on this.

In (13), we see this type of combined responses in the same sequence:

(13) INSERT EXAMPLE (13) HERE

'Yesterday's #debate5RTVE is reduced to this, by candidates, now you may reflect
which one you take #10N It is clear to me #IVoteUnidasPodemos
#BlowjobsPodemos'

Tweet and responses to them posted by @Cule_Antifa_ . 05-11-2019:
<https://twitter.com/Cule_Antifa_/status/1191720152586498050>. Retrieved: 07-06-2021

The meme of the initial message summarises the contents of the debate in relation to each candidate with a humorous intention, by adding on each figure a list of "keywords"

which ironically synthesize the discourse of the candidates. In the case of Rivera the list makes reference to some objects that the candidate showed during the debate - as seen in memes (3) and (4); but, the author of the meme takes this opportunity to criticise also the overuse of complacent and repetitive discourses by Pablo Casado (PP) and Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), as well as the obsession of Santiago Abascal for legal punishment and sanctions (Vox). Conversely, in the case of Pablo Iglesias (Unidas Podemos), the author stresses the word *propuestas* (“proposals”) and includes the hashtag #YoVotoUnidas Podemos (IVoteUnidasPodemos), inviting the audience to infer that she or he is in favour of this political option. But the author inserts a second hashtag that contains the word *mamadas* (blowjob) associated to the name of the Party she or he explicitly supports, thus triggering an unexpected meaning. The hashtag, which has an auto ironic intention, reminds the reader of the tweet of one moment during the debate that came with an error by the Podemos candidate, who maintained that there were “many women scandalized by so many blowjobs (*mamadas*)”, in a lapsus to refer to those known as “herds” (*manadas*) of men convicted or prosecuted for abusing women.

As we can see in the thread (13a), users adopt most of the strategies observed in the preceding cases for expressing disagreement indirectly, through irony:

(13a) INSERT EXAMPLE (13a) HERE

‘Beautiful as an example of partisanship and lack of impartiality’

‘What a ridiculously biased view.’

‘You missed so “many blowjobs” and some more phrases from Pablo. But as a meme it’s great’

The first message includes a GIF where the actor Leonardo di Caprio applauds. This is seemingly a compliment, but with an ironic intention, since the user considers this a “beautiful example” of political partiality. The message which follows expresses this

type of criticism too, albeit with certain caution (“If you hadn’t spoken wonders about Podemos so much”); the humour contained in the meme is recognised and accepted by the user, who reproduces the laughter and thanks the interlocutor: “This made me laugh. Thanks”, manifesting approval of the political-ideological contents of the meme. Compliments in the two last replies have a similar function in this context, even though the latter, which contains a positive emotion emoji, highlights the “ridiculously biased” perspective of the meme. In this case, both elements (the emoji and the utterance) contain a certain degree of ambiguity.

Other threads from the corpus may be deemed as samples of what Attardo call *sustained humour* (Attardo, 2019) in interaction, when the ironic and humorous utterances commenting a political meme extend over two replies, thereby nurturing solidarity between the interlocutors, as in colloquial oral conversation (Alvarado Ortega, 2014). In these cases, the concept of *humorous sequence* (Ruiz Gurillo, 2019b), must also be considered. A humorous sequence is defined as a structural and topical unit which has a hook - a humorous utterance incorporated into the text structure -, or a *punchline* - when the humorous utterance is the last one in the discourse. As we can see, for example, in (14), a series of replies published sequentially in a single thread, comment on the meme contained in a tweet from @eldiarioes, which is dedicated precisely to the memes posted on social networks about the objects that Rivera showed in the electoral debate. This message acts as a springboard for a dialogue between two users arising from a second meme. This meme reproduces a scene from the comedy *Top Secret* (1984) in which the spy Agent Cedric, performed by Omar Sharif, plays with the trinkets of a source, as not to draw attention to their secret conversation. But the trinkets in the suitcase turn out to be gag gifts that provoke humour. This scene invites the audience to infer the analogy between the objects shown by Rivera and the gag gifts of this non-

sense humorous scene. This interpretation is reinforced by the apparent rhetorical question: “Artículos de coña o político de coña” (“gag objects or gag politician”), which is intended to criticise the politician:

(14) INSERT EXAMPLE (14) HERE

‘A paving stone from Barcelona, a list, some card, a map, a collage made of photos...
Rivera’s objects flood the memes from... on Twitter.’

‘Gag objects or gag politicians’

‘My question is.. what is David Vidal doing in the picture?’

‘As the coach for lost causes’

Tweet and responses to them posted by @eldiarioes. 05-11-2019:
<<https://twitter.com/eldiarioes/status/1191658154737774592>>. Retrieved: 07-06-2021

This tweet can be considered as a hook, since the third tweet responds directly to the first “question”, formulating a new question: why David Vidal, a Spanish football coach, appears in that scene. Humour is generated here through a script opposition which creates incoherence, as the image does not concern the Spanish coach but rather Sharif. The joke is based upon the physical likeness between the well-known actor and Vidal. A third tweet in the sequence elaborates further on this analogy using the word “coach”, which has been implicitly activated in the mind of other users. The message “entrenador de causas perdidas” (“coach for lost causes”) may be interpreted as a *punchline* in this humorous sequence, since it comes back to the original meme, whose target is the leader of Ciudadanos and the highly probable defeat of this party in the elections. The author of this meme invites readers to link this politician to lost causes.

This is a frequent type of humorous sequence in the corpus; however, it is not possible to link it to a dialogue or a conversational sequence. As stated by Chovanec and Tsakona (2018: 9), in digital communication *sequentiality and linearity* must not be confused. Rather, interactions on Twitter may be considered *polylogues* since many

different voices intervene in these threads. The fact that the messages are shown on the interface of the microblog one on top of another does not imply that there is a linear relationship between them.

By way of summarising the main results of the study, we propose a taxonomy of the reactions to the memes which were shared by Twitter users during the 10N electoral campaign.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

Figure 6. Percentages for each type of reaction.

Figure 6 summarizes the results according to the type of replies addressed to the humoristic political memes within the corpus. First, all the memes have been retweeted or marked with a *Like*. This may be interpreted as a token of appreciation for the humorous message of a meme. Other (4.64%) simply mention the profile of another Twitter user, in order to reach other users and, perhaps, viralise the meme. This can be seen as an implicit manifestation of recognition and understanding of humor.

Another of the phases that a statement usually goes through to provoke humor is that of appreciation. This reaction is conveyed in most cases through emojis (6.39 %), tweets that include onomatopoeias that replicate laughter (4.03 %), popular audiovisual gifs (2.10 %), or replies with colloquial expressions (1.75 %). Also, messages containing compliments towards the meme or its author could be considered expressions of appreciation, and even agreement. Such an agreement is made manifest in tweets that include criticism to the political target of the meme, and express ideological affiliation with its content and author (4.94 %). Finally, Twitter users often show signs of continued humor. These are the most recurrent in the corpus, since they occur in 55.85 % of tweets. However, manifestations of failed humor have also been found, either because the response contains an opinion that does not contribute to the humorous

interaction in the context (12.86 %), because it refers to questions that do not relate to the meme's content (1.36 %), or even because the user formulates a dissenting act (1.44 %) or an attack towards the author of the meme.

5. Conclusions

In this study we have attempted to show that Twitter users share and comment memes with political-electoral content dynamically and, thus, co-creating satirical humor. Memes are effective means for re-elaborating the electoral message and evaluating the candidates and the party members, as well as their arguments, while incorporating elements of popular culture that aim at entertaining the imagined audience in the microblog.

The qualitative analysis carried out shows that memes are used as argumentative strategies in order to obtain recognition and increase the number of followers. The authors of these humorous tweets make a series of lexical, grammatical, and phonetic choices according to the context and the argumentative strategy adopted; these choices are also made in the perspective of an interpersonal exchange with the reader (Ruiz Gurillo 2012). Moreover, such choices are likely to be interpreted as markers and indicators of verbal humor, as they allow the resolution of the logical inconsistency posed by the humorous memes contained in the tweets.

The fundamental condition for humor to succeed is that interlocutors share a common knowledge base. Indeed, the contextual verbal cues included in the messages and the frames on the Spanish political and media systems evoked in most of the memes as a common knowledge shared by participants in the interaction produce particularized

conversational implicatures that invite the readers to resolve the opposition scripts producing humour. In this respect, the analysis shows that there are different categories of humorous memes. We distinguish between those supported by an opposition-script based on a hyperbolic imperfect reasoning, and those based on the electoral campaign development. Frequently, the tweets recur to parody and intertextuality, and some are clearly ironic, especially in conversational exchanges. In many of the cases multimodal content plays a central role, hence, pictures, gifs, and emojis contribute to the resolution of the incongruence too.

Putting the focus on the communicative goals of these tweets, we have identified several messages in which humor may be used target the political candidates, their parties, or even other members of their party. Humor serves, thus, to reinforce the ties with the audience through reinforcing and subversive humor, challenging power relationships. In the corpus, interactional humor is used as an instrument of cohesion, leading to a greater closeness between members of the political or ideological in-group, as well as to cooperate in elaborating jokes within an informal context. The recipients of political memes may participate and communicate among each other and with the producers of the memes, thereby going from passive recipients to dynamic co-creators. However, most of the replies analysed combine two types of reactions: on the one hand, users recognise and approve the humour contained by including emojis, animated GIFs, and onomatopoeias which provoke laughter or express a compliment; on the other hand, they send a tweet that may recognise the humorous intention, but do not appreciate it. In this case, the author of the dissenting tweet expresses explicit or implicit disagreement, by means of irony with a negative effect on the social face of the author of the meme and of the political-ideological group to which he or she belongs to.

As a result of the findings of the present study, we think it might be interesting to design a larger corpus in order to undertake a quantitative analysis of both memes and reactions to them and get a more fine-grained classification of humorous interactional tweets about politics.

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