

## Memes as Language: What Wittgenstein Tells Us About Internet Culture



The 21st century has experienced substantial technological advancements that have changed the course of human life in just under 50 years. One of the most influential advancements has been the internet. Even in its developing stage in the early 90s, the way we would interact with the internet today was somewhat inconceivable. With cell phones, wifi, and data, there is not one second of the day when we are not connected the world wide web. We contain almost the all the world's knowledge within the palm of our hands and are free to look up anything on a whim. Because of this, the internet is a breeding ground for important philosophical questions. Since Aristotle, Hume, and Descartes never had the opportunity to witness this occurrence, it is up to modern philosophers to navigate the uncharted philosophical territory. One of the most bizarre and interesting phenomena on the internet are memes. A meme, originally defined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, is a unit of information that is passed not by through genes, but by imitation. Although Dawkins' original definition was to describe animal behavior, it has since been adopted to mean internet memes. Like genes, memes survive on their ability to be copied and replicated with slight variations. While genes use DNA as a vehicle of information, internet memes usually contain their message in a picture or video captioned with a relevant title. Like the internet, memes have evolved over the past couple of years. In the early ages, only certain absurd images with ridiculous captions would be categorized as memes (Figure 1). But, with the invention of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, the way we categorize memes has changed. Instead of having a select few images dedicated to "being memes", any picture, drawing, tweet, or media that is deemed amusing enough could become a meme.

This broader definition, combined with easy access to means of production, allowed people to look for "meme-able" moments in their lives. Memes became less about visual comedy and more about relatability. But, what makes a meme relatable? How do we see an image and words on a screen and automatically understand what they are trying to communicate? Why can we understand some memes but not others? For this, we can turn to Wittgenstein. Although Wittgenstein never lived to see the internet, his work in philosophy of

language can help us understand how this internet phenomenon works. Memes and language have a lot in common. They are both behavior that we learn through imitation, they both have the capacity to transfer information from one person to another, and their meaning are both dependent on the broader context of the meme or sentence that we are using. We can apply Wittgenstein's major ideas about language to memes.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein made the marvelous discovery that language gets its meaning from its use. Unlike the logical positivists before him, Wittgenstein's new theory did not rely on logic to create a perfect, precise, scientific language. Instead, he examined the way we use ordinary language to come to understanding. Language is the way we interact with ourselves, each other, and the world. The meaning of words and phrases come from the way we use them in our everyday lives. For example, the word "five" does not get its meaning from a "five" object that it refers to. Instead, we have collectively decided for this utterance to stand for a certain number of things. The way we combine these words into meaningful statements is called a language game. This term was inspired when Wittgenstein realized that there is no clear way to define the word "game" by using its correspondence to reality. If we did, a fundamental part of what a game really is will be excluded out of the definition.

Like games, language cannot be defined in terms of references. If it is, there will be some component of language not represented by the definition. So, language can be thought of as a series of simpler games. A language game can be anything from telling someone your name, asking for a glass of water, or telling a joke. Although many actual games like chess share qualities with language, language games are much more complicated and have less concrete rules. However, for language to work, there must be some conventional rules of how we use signs and utterances to say what we mean. Otherwise, no one would be able to understand each other. These rules are dependent on the language game and the community that uses it. For example, one language game could use the word "game" to mean poker but another can use "game" to mean hide and seek. Although these two words have different references, they share what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance. Both of these games have participants, rules, winners, losers, and other structural similarities that allow us to group them together in the same word: game.

Memes are language games learned through imitation. Most millennials are already fluent in memes but, if I sent a meme to my mother, she would have no idea what I am trying to show her. Just as someone taught us the difference between apples and oranges as a child, we must be shown the structure and meaning of different memes before we can use them ourselves. However, the difficult part is knowing where to get started. There are memes about sensations (Figure 2), memes about music (Figure 3), and even memes about Wittgenstein (Figure 4). How can we ever define what a meme is? Using a Wittgensteinian model, we can define memes by their use. Like the word "game", there is no catch all definition that can describe what memes are. For example, figure 3 and 4 use a combination of pictures and text while figure 2 is only text. Figure 3 and figure 4 have two different images but those images have also been used in other memes as well. Just like language, the scope of memes is far too wide to have concrete definitions and rules. But, there are just enough linguistic signs to uncover the meaning of each

memes. Just like language games, we need to know the context, the rules, and community to understand memes.

For example, take figure 4. This is the most abstract and hardest to understand because there are different levels of context that the viewer needs. First and foremost, they should recognize the structure of the meme. This is called “The Floor is Lava” meme. According to KnowYourMeme, this meme began around 2017 when a viral challenge called #TheFloorIsLava was popular. When someone yelled “the floor is lava”, all the participants in the challenge have to find the quickest way to get their feet off of the ground. This is why the person in the picture does not have their feet on the floor. Then, you must recognize that the identity of this anonymous person has been replaced by Ludwig Wittgenstein. This quickly narrows down the meaning of the meme to a strict Wittgenstein context. Then, you read the phrase “the floor is nonsense”. Using your background knowledge of memes, you realize that Wittgenstein is trying to avoid hitting the floor. Finally, you would have to have read the Tractatus famous last line that said “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence” to understand that Wittgenstein is avoiding the floor because he does not want to talk nonsense. All of these clues and context reveal the meaning of the meme.

But, if we can not define what a meme is precisely, then how can we tell if something is a meme or not? Wittgenstein answers that you can see a family resemblance between all memes. Although each meme has unique content, we can see connections between one kind of meme to another. Figure 3 and figure 4 have nothing to do with each other. One makes fun of a famous song while the other makes fun of a famous philosopher. However, since we can gather that they are both making fun of something, we can see the family resemblance between these two seemingly different memes. The more we get exposed to memes, the easier it becomes to differentiate what is a meme and what is not (Figure 5). Nonsensical memes are those that follow the same structure as other memes but do not have any inherent meaning. Unlike figure 4 that carries some information about Wittgenstein, there is no possible way we can gather meaning using context or clues for figure 5. The less context you need to understand, the more relatable a meme is. However, the most satisfying memes are the ones at the edge of your breadth of knowledge. Being able to understand a meme that others can too takes away the exclusivity and mysteriousness from an abstract meme like figure 4.

Memes are the fast growing form of communication amongst the youth. They allow us to use ridiculous images to point out a state of affairs that seems puzzling. The cat meme above seems to perfectly describe the inconsistencies we feel when switching between mental language and spoken language. Memes also allow us to communicate with a unique community of our choosing, like people who like to read 20th century Austrian philosophers. However, the most impressive feature of memes is that they are endlessly expressive. Memes are often better communicators of feeling and sensation than any kind of language looked at by previous philosophers. And thanks to modern messaging services, we are just one click away from sharing information preserved in memes to our closest friends. Memes are a language game that are, unfortunately, exclusive to the tech savvy. However, generational differences in communication is another question for modern age philosophers to inquire about.

## The Memes



Figure 1: This is the Archaic rap meme. One of the oldest but popular memes, the original painting is a self-portrait by eccentric artist Joseph Ducreux. However, its silliness has given rise to a meme in which popular rap songs and phrases in hip hop culture are permuted into old English. This particular one is from the song "Who let the dogs out?"



Jessica Rumo  
@itsOnly\_Jessica



Cranberry juice tastes like it wants to be alcohol but it's too shy.

Figure 2: This meme is from Twitter. It points out an interesting sensational phenomenon. For those who have tasted both cranberry juice and alcohol, one can tell the similarities between them but cranberry juice is not as potent as alcohol. This humorous way of describing the sensation engages the audience that understand its pretenses.

David: \*plays a secret chord\*

The Lord:



Figure 3: This is from the song “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen. This song is widely popular among young adults since it was featured in the animated movie Shrek. The first lines in this song are “I heard there was a secret chord that David played and it pleased the lord”. This meme is a manifestation of those lyrics. The astreks here are used to denote the act of playing the chord while the kid’s nonchalant approval is supposed to represent the lord.

The floor is nonsense



Figure 4: The floor is lava meme including Ludwig Wittgenstein. Context given in the body of the essay



Figure 5: This is an example of a nonsensical meme. Although the images and text structure seem to fit into the family resemblance of memes, there is no context and no meaning we can get from this “meme”

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