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Reframing the reality of online learning on the basis of internet memes

Słowa kluczowe: memy internetowe, nauczanie zdalne, multimodalność, konceptualizacja

Keywords: internet memes, online learning, multimodality, cognitive approach

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many areas of human life and forced us to adapt to systematically introduced restrictions, one of which was remote learning. An unprecedented and unexpected lockdown made teachers, pupils, students and their families rely on Internet communication and encounter myriad problems, the most obvious of which were equipment and space limitations, technical problems, lack of experience in distance learning and short attention span in front of a computer screen. Pedagogy in the pandemic has become the subject of numerous publications, both descriptive and prescriptive (see e.g. Schwartzman 2020), but it has also been the subject of much informal critique in the form of internet memes. While some may dismiss meme culture as mockery, joking is an effective stress-reliever as humour can reframe negative experiences, turning them into positive emotions, which results in (even if only temporary) relief (Dynel 2020 after Kuiper et al. 1993 and Martin 2007).

Memes as objects of academic observation have been approached from various angles: culture and media studies (Wójcicka 2020), cultural and linguistic perspectives (Davison 2012, Makowska 2013, Sroka 2014), pragmatics and a pragma-semiotic approach (Grundlingh 2017, Abdel-Raheem 2019, Dynel 2020), and cognitive linguistics (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017). The present study aims to investigate the interplay between image and text with reference to chosen cognitive models in order to analyse the image of distance learning, involving in particular the relationship between the student and the teacher. This study will examine the bilateral nature of memes in relation to the cognitive linguistics framework, with emphasis on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), originated by George Lakoff and Mark

Johnson (1980) and further developed by other researchers, i.e. Zoltan Kovecses (2002) and Charles Forceville (1996, 2008, 2009) as well as Ronald Langacker's construal theory (1987, 2008) which asserts that the conceptualization of a given entity is based not only on the content, but also on the form, which requires choices at its various levels: specificity, focusing, prominence, and perspective. Additionally, this study will examine select instances with reference to the blending theory of Fauconnier and Turner (2002). By putting these specific theories in conversation with each other, this study creates a snapshot of the unique reality of the 2020–2021 school year.

Internet memes

Memes have become a widespread form of online communication. The very concept of a meme originates in Richard Dawkins' theory (1976) of a self-replicating equivalent of genes responsible for the passing down of tradition, behaviour, skills, and ideas. However, the casual understanding of a meme departs from this explanation: a meme can be defined as a visual or bimodal/multimodal creation (e.g. an image, video, piece of text, gif, screenshot, etc.) that spreads among internet users due to its humorous potential. It is the comic effect and replicability that seem to be appealing in a meme and make it "contagious"; memes are often referred to as "virals" because they spread as rapidly as viruses. The dissemination of memes has been recognised as following two models: mimicry (involving transmutations/alternations of given instances by internet users) and remixing (employing software-mediated modifications such as Photoshop remakes) (Shifman 2011, 2014).

Mimicry and remix are thus conquering the Web, and the term "meme" seems particularly suitable to describe this glut of reworks, as the concept — deliberately connoting "mimesis" — is flexible enough to capture a wide range of communicative intentions and actions, spanning all the way from naïve copying to scornful imitation (Shifman 2014).

The attractiveness of this form of expression is also demonstrated by the potential that lies in the combination of the verbal and the visual, which complement each other, allowing for almost unlimited conceptualization and facilitating the recognition of various linguistic functions. Van Leeuwen (2005) sees memes as multimodal communication acts that combine various verbal, typographic and graphic elements. Indeed, in meme expression, the boundaries between text and non-text seem to blur: "Surfaces today are described by only one language. Everything is an image today" (Lunenfeld 2011).

A meme also seems to be a perfect vehicle for linguistic creativity, wordplay involving homophony, homonymy, or polysemy, making intentional spelling mistakes, alluding or employing intertextuality, and, above all, making evident use of rhetorical figures such as metaphor, metonymy and hyperbole. Although their form seems to be quite compact and concise, they are clearly constructions that incorporate rich and multidimensional content. These multimodal constructions (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017) engage the recipient, activating various cognitive mechanisms, e.g. inference, cognitive dissonance, profiling of various elements, etc. Combining

a verbal and visual means of expression allows for condensing a message that apart from displaying a cognitive function also results in an affective one; hence, an effective interpretation stirs the respondent's emotional reaction, humorous relief, or a commentary.

In order to grasp the encoded message, the recipient has to recognize the conceptual packets and 'unpack' them, which is why the elements of the message need to be overt and discernible. However, interpretation of a meme often requires extra-contextual knowledge such as a convention fostered by a meme as well as other displayed components, including quotes, sayings, names, etc., which can spark intertextuality, allusion, and above all, connotation—the rudimental semantic operation for creating meaning. A skilful decoding of a message (e.g. observing presupposition) is found among interlocutors belonging to the same culture and sharing a similar background; otherwise, a meme is perceived as meaningless and devoid of humour.

Students' (and teachers') attitudes to online classes

Online learning has changed our behaviour on many levels. If we look exclusively at the way students attend online classes, we notice that radical changes have taken place. The teacher might not even see their students for months, and only by interacting via audio or chat can the teacher indicate the student's social presence in the class. The metonymy FACE IS THE PERSON is replaced here with the new metonymy MICROPHONE/CAMERA IS THE PERSON that is mapping parts of electronic equipment to a student—in other words, their speaking—which in turn is the result of their active participation.



Fig. 1

Teacher in Online Class: *Asks Question*
Me:



Fig. 2

E-LEKCJE

Nauczyciele: Uczniowie:



Fig. 3

The teachers becomes used to the new "faces" of the students which are cameras and mics (Fig. 1). Physical presence is not something that indicates students' social presence; it is rather their attention and readiness to speak, which is implied by the switched on microphone. The metonymy PARS PRO TOTO indicates that the microphone the student is using stands for their computer and therefore for the student (EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymy). When the student decides to skip the class, it is enough just to switch off the microphone and the camera. Students who

are not attending the class and have their mics off automatically become absent. As a result, our attention and engagement rather than our physical presence counts as our social presence as in the traditional classroom.

The expression “technical issues” has now also become very common and is used as a blanket term to stand for various non-technical issues such as oversleeping and being late, lack of answers, unwillingness to switch on the camera and microphone, etc. In the picture (Fig. 2) there is Felonius Gru, the protagonist from the animation film *Despicable Me*. We can see that he reports to his boss during a virtual meeting via screen, but the essential information is obscured/ bleeped by the caption ‘mic’ which stands for sound issues. In the meme we see the analogy to the online classes and “technical problems” that are an inevitable part of online communication. The problems with technology which were usually associated with teacher’s activities such as giving presentations, getting computer and speaker access, etc. became in online classes an integral component of students’ participation. According to Frame semantics, “teacher in online class” evokes a semantic frame of the concept of distance learning where the familiar roles of teacher and students are modified accordingly. The teacher corresponds to the invisible boss on the screen in front of the protagonist, and Gru corresponds to the student who is expected to answer the question. He keeps face when he is reporting to his boss, but the essential information is blurred, and from the subtitles we gather that it happens because of technical problems with the microphone. It is unclear whether during the online class the student really says something or their answer is “bleeped” because the question is hard to answer or the student did not pay attention and now does not know what to say but do not want to lose face and therefore reach for the euphemism “technical problems”. In the original scene from *Despicable Me*, Gru reports to his boss: “In terms of money, we have no money,” providing the frame for the humorous depiction of a relatable situation. The diagram in Fig. 4 sets forth an analysis of this situation in terms of Blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017).

Another meme (Fig. 3) shows students’ and teachers’ engagement in the remote classes. While the teacher can be teaching from the comfort of their couch at home, students sometimes do not bother to get out of their beds, which then results in turning down the request to switch on their cameras, since they feel uncomfortable and reluctant to share their personal space with the rest of the class. Teaching from home tempts one to loosen the formalities, so some teachers are only partially clothed (the visible upper part) during the class, and also students’ attention is scattered, since they feel free to eat/drink when lying in their bed, not paying full attention to the lesson. We can track in this picture the primary metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD, and the mapping-idea cognizer is food consumer (teacher is giving the ideas and the student is receiving/consuming them). The communication schema TEACHER IS THE SENDER and STUDENT IS A RECEIVER also works here. The student becomes a real consumer who is actually eating and drinking during the class (according to the frame COMMUNICATING IS FEEDING)¹.

¹ Fig. 5 https://metaphor.icsi.berkeley.edu/pub/en/index.php/Metaphor:COMMUNICATING_IS_FEEDING

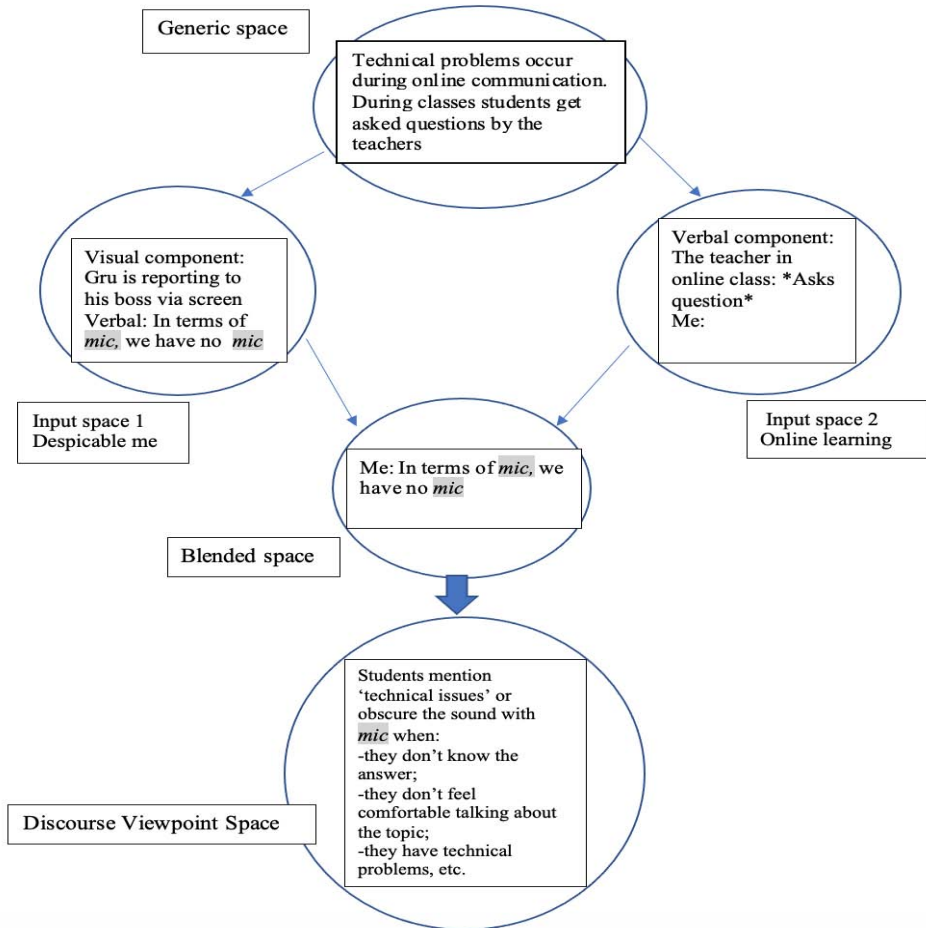


Fig. 4



Fig. 5 Metaphor: COMMUNICATING IS FEEDING

Specific metaphors ACQUIRING IDEAS IS EATING and LEARNING IS GETTING NUTRITIOUS FOOD with target frame LEARNING and source frame FOOD explain the learning process in terms of food consumption. If we look further into details and analyse the quality of the food being consumed, we could see that in the picture (Fig. 3) it is junk food which would translate to the similar quality of the knowledge

acquired and, therefore, later transform into corresponding outcomes of the online learning.



Fig. 6

Another meme that is related to food consumption depicts Patrick Star, an overweight pink starfish from the *SpongeBob Square Pants* cartoon series. He is caught at the moment of devouring junk food and cakes, an exaggerated picture of what students often do (eating and drinking) during online classes. That explains why in some cases students are not ready to turn on their cameras upon a teacher's request. The meme gives us a peek into students' private space and, in a humorous way, reveals why they are reluctant to switch on their cameras. The structure of the meme (Fig. 6) is similar to "when- memes" (Lou 2017) with only selected aspects being cross mapped: "When we find ourselves in the situation described verbally in the when- clause text, we respond in ways similar to the response presented visually in the meme's image" (Dancyngier and Vandelanotte 2017); "when you are in situation X, you act or feel like Y," in which Y is depicted emotion (Lou 2017).

The following picture (Fig. 7) is a variation of the meme known as "This is Fine" which is part of the webcomic "On Fire" (2013) by K. C. Green. It shows an anthropomorphic dog sitting at a table, drinking coffee, and saying "This is fine" while the room it is in bursts into flames². This image can be interpreted as denoting one's keeping calm despite being in a threatening situation and is often used in internet discourse as standing for accepting (perhaps downplaying) one's position or dealing with something negative, e.g. stress (see *This is Fine*, n.d.). In the following take on the meme, the caption, "Not doing any online-learning assignments and just

² As part of a practical English class in March 2021, I (J.O.) asked students to comment on the original meme "This is fine," which did not have any caption on the first panel, so that the students felt free to interpret it and connect with any source domain. In response, the association with the exam session was immediately brought up and the fire was conceptualized as the upcoming exams. This interpretation fits in with the recipient's understanding of abstract content (i.e. fire surrounding a dog) as a potential danger. Another association was the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly growing number of people infected.

watching your grades fall” makes us perceive the dog as a student oblivious to their assignments.

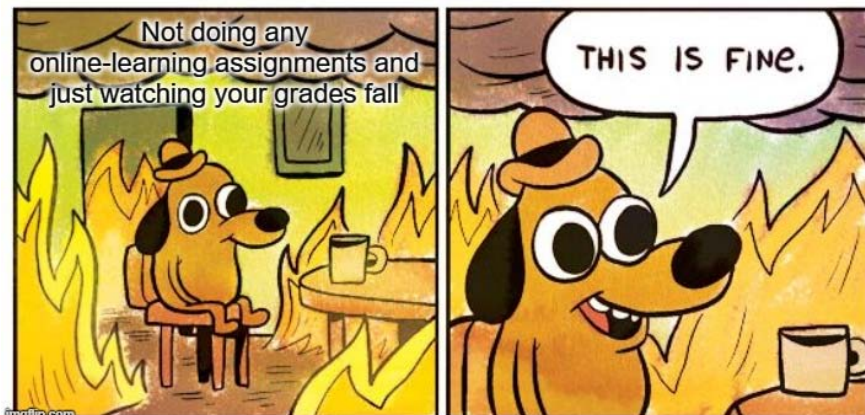


Fig. 7

The meme is based on a pictorial metaphor in which flames, billowing smoke, and the general imagery of fire constitute the conceptual domain express the student's situation which was introduced verbally. Knowing that the end of the semester finishes with an evaluation of the student's work, we can guess that the outcome will probably be poor, given the presented attitude. The “burning” situation of the student involves the reification of the concept of time (Langacker 2009) constructed from the perspective of the student, which is expressed nonverbally in the form of flames. Hence, the conceptualisation employs FIRE, functioning as the source domain in the metaphor END OF SEMESTER IS FIRE. The metaphor is discernible even for observers not familiar with the convention of the meme as pictorial metaphors are quite universal: Forceville (2008: 463) notes that visual metaphors have an advantage over verbal ones in the form of “perceptual immediacy,” a higher level of detail (specificity), and exerting a stronger emotional influence on the recipient.

FIRE is an image-rich concept often associated with physical damage, intensity, danger of high intensity, and danger in general (see Kovecses 1990). The intensity of FIRE designates and quantifies the target domain phenomenon. Semino (2020) observes that fire is a perfect source domain for any phenomenon that has a detrimental effect on something by spreading as “fires cause harm and destruction by progressively increasing in size and intensity.” Hence, the phrase “watching your grades fall” can be seen as a process parallel to the spreading of fire, thus the pictorial metaphor triggers conceptual mapping, in which we can figure out the following systematic correspondences between the source and the target:

- the student → the dog
- the flames → the ignored assignments (resulting in falling grades)
- the burning time → the progress of the semester

We can further project that the point of the flames reaching the dog would correspond to the end of the semester and the final evaluation of the student's

progress. The mappings are easy to discern as both fires and school semesters are gradual and follow the same evolution: beginnings, middles, ends, aftermaths (see Semino 2020). The impression of flames slowly engulfing the dog is coherent with the progress of the semester and, of course, time. That is why the end of the semester can be conceptualised within the metaphor *TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT* (Time moving vs Ego moving metaphor) that is subsumed under the umbrella metaphor of *CHANGE IS MOTION* and *TIME IS SUBSTANCE* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The overall image of the student presented in the meme is rather negative: despite being aware of the consequences, he ignores online school assignments.

Students' and teachers' (dis)involvement



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Disinvolvement is also depicted in the next picture (Fig. 8) which compares teachers' involvement in distance learning with students' reactions on the basis of juxtaposing a photo of an actor portraying Elton John in *Rocketman* (2019) and a photo of Bernie Sanders, a former socialist presidential candidate in the US. The hyperbolic abundance of Elton John's costume (a bright pink tuft of feathers, oversized sunglasses, a cap with pointy peacock feathers) contrasts with the visible aloofness of Bernie Sanders manifested in his body posture (crossed legs and hands may indicate a closed position, defending attitude, reluctance towards any communication) and outfit (he is wrapped in a warm jacket, thick woollen mittens, and a mask over his mouth). Known for his keen and passionate tone of public speaking, here, Sanders is sitting completely alone, seemingly wanting to stay inconspicuous or even invisible. The story behind his look at that very moment is that he felt offended or at least sulky during Joe Biden's inauguration; this attitude has

become recognized over the internet mostly as a synonym of pouting and boredom, but also indifference, lack of commitment, isolation, etc. These two pictures stay in a contrast that is additionally highlighted with zooming in on Taron Egerton as Elton John, which further hyperbolizes his image, and zooming out from Sanders, which introduces conceptual distance amplifying the image of reclusiveness.

A verbal component of the meme clarifies the reason behind this juxtaposition, captioning the first picture as “Teachers engaging students online” and the second one as (the response of) “Students.” The conceptual mapping triggers the projection of constituent conceptual elements between the visual and the verbal (that is, the teacher is the Rocketman and the student is Bernie Sanders), allowing for the interpretation that teachers put a lot of effort into engaging students while students stay oblivious to their efforts. The incongruity resulting from the comparison of the pictures along with the hyperbolization in the visuals result in a humorous effect. However, again, the image of students is rather negative.

Keeping students’ attention during digital learning is not an easy task mainly due to the fact that their motivation might be lower than when they are exposed to social interaction with peers, face-to-face interpersonal communication, and the personal guidance of teachers. An ambient home surrounding may also connote rest rather than intellectual engagement. And, above all, the possibilities provided by access to the Web are at a student’s disposal and may entirely grab their attention.

It turns out that it is a difficult task to even make students switch on their mics and cameras, not to mention inspire active participation (as displayed in the previous picture). A similar case is portrayed in the next meme (Fig. 9) which depicts a parallel construction allowing for a direct comparison between a pre-pandemic school situation (denoted by the top text as “Teachers in normal class”) and a present school situation (“Teachers in online classes”). The focus is put on the teacher, but the presented reaction reflects the student’s attitude.

The visual layer depicts two meme characters known as Swole Doge and Cheems that both derive from a 2010 meme dog known as Doge (see *Swole Doge vs. Cheems*, n.d.). The meme is based on a created analogy between a teacher and a cartoon dog according to the metaphor TEACHER IS SWOLE DOGE and TEACHER IS CHEEMS. In order to interpret the polysemiotic structure shown here and appreciate the joke presented in it, the recipient must have some extra-contextual knowledge. By convention, the meme shows representatives of the same group at different times: Swole Doge expresses some attitude from the past that has now deteriorated and is visualised as Cheems. Each of the incarnations of the dog (we can say that both creatures are variations of the same character, Doge) connotes different features: an exaggerated muscular physique is supposed to stand for strength and domination according to the metaphor BIG IS STRONG, which is included in the correlation between size and force (SIZE → FORCE) and the metaphor SIGNIFICANT IS BIG. All that is in line with the observation by Kovecses (2002) that metaphors in comic books and satirical drawings are often presented literally. Hence, by contrast, Cheems is supposed to represent weakness and awkwardness. It is worth noting that imperfection is inscribed even in his name as it derives from the word ‘cheeseburger’ and metonymically refers to language mistakes that the dog makes,

the most common of which are misspelled words, particularly erroneous additions of the letter “m” (see *Cheems*, n.d.).

The connotations of the visual are enhanced by the verbal: the bottom text “Stop talking” depicts the teacher’s attitude as dominant. The imperative shows the teacher as a commanding person, having an advantage over the interlocutors, which correlates with the traits symbolized by Swole Doge. A change in tone of speech occurs in the utterance “Please say something,” which places the teacher in an inferior position. Each of the characters was also endowed with an attribute: a piece of chalk and a laptop, respectively, which links the verbal and visual layers, creating the image of a teacher in the school versus a teacher in the virtual classroom. This juxtaposition seems humorous on the surface; however, it has a rather pessimistic message and indicates the teacher’s helplessness against the students’ unwillingness to cooperate during e-lessons.

Time perception difference

It turns out that conducting online classes requires much more effort than ordinary teaching, which may result in different time perception, physical exhaustion, and mental fatigue. “1 Hour on this Planet Is 7 Years on Earth” refers to a series of two-panel image macros based on a scene from the 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar* (see *1 Hour Here Is 7 Years on Earth*, n.d.). In the film, time passes in various ways depending on the gravitational field in which the characters find themselves. In one sequence of the film, one hour on an alien planet is seven years on earth. A screenshot from the scene, as well as the concept for the temporal parameters of the planet, are the basis for the meme (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

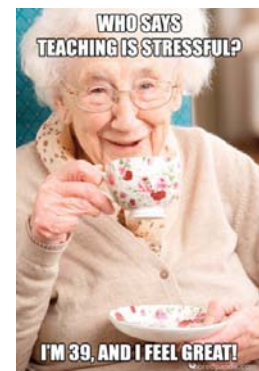


Fig. 12

In the context of teaching, the picture (Fig. 10) focuses on the effort and stress that online classes cause, mapping the expressions “here” to online and “on earth” to traditional classes. Time is perceived differently online, and the efforts teachers put into one hour of distance teaching feels like the equivalent of seven years of teaching in the traditional classroom. The deliberate exaggeration implies the humorous nature of the message, but the meme expresses that teachers are becoming physically

and emotionally drained due to more stressful and exhausting requirements, which eventually may lead to “Zoom Fatigue” as a result of increased cognitive load, lack of movement, accumulated stress, etc. (see Ramachandran 2021).

Another meme (Fig. 11) tackling the issue of time perception and fatigue features four pictures of actor Jack Nicholson (again we are dealing with the metonymy FACE IS A PERSON) over the years. The photos are arranged (almost) chronologically to form a square suggesting sequential visual scanning from left to right. The first image depicts young Nicholson in the 1960s, the next one is a shot from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), the third is a snapshot from *About Schmidt* (2002), and the last is from *Batman* (1989). While the production dates show that the images do not fully reflect the chronological order, the effect of the progress of time is intact thanks to the striking stage make-up Nicholson wore for the role of Joker.

The meme creates an analogy between the image presented in the photos and the teacher's experience. Each of the pictures is captioned: a young actor with an impeccable appearance is to represent a student of pedagogics (“Teacher student”), the more mature Nicholson with a slightly tousled hairstyle is the teacher with ten years of teaching experience (“10 years of teaching”), the actor in his sixties is to reflect twenty years in the profession (“20 years of teaching”), and, finally, Nicholson in the role of Joker is meant to represent the teacher during the pandemic (“ONLINE TEACHING”). This depiction is hyperbolic and, together with the perceptible incongruity caused by a change in the linear sequence (the last picture is expected to be labelled “30 years of teaching”), triggers a humorous response. Such deliberate departures from an expected and obvious interpretation that must be cancelled and replaced with a non-obvious one are referred to by Dynel (2009) as garden-paths: “[T]hese are short humorous text couched in covert ambiguity (of various types) emergent only at the final stage of online processing, when the initially overt and obvious (default / salient) interpretation needs to be cancelled and superseded by an alternative meaning, so far covert” (Dynel 2009: 1). Such a representation of the panels ascribes primary attention to the last picture, making it the figure against the ground (that is, the remaining pictures) (Langacker 1987). In contrast to the first three representations, the caption “ONLINE TEACHING” is spelled with capital letters, which further enhances the conspicuity of the figure.

The meme aims to present distance teaching for one year as a more exhausting enterprise than twenty years of ordinary teaching. This effect was facilitated by the use of hyperbolization and humorous incongruity. The process of visual aging paired with deterioration of visual appeal supports the metaphor TIME IS A DESTROYER, which reflects a teacher's fatigue and weariness.

The same metaphor shapes the interpretation of another meme (Fig. 12). We can see an elderly woman (a granny) with a positive facial expression drinking tea. The verbal component, “Who says teaching is stressful? I'm 39, and I feel great!” makes us reconceptualise the primary interpretation triggered by the visuals and see an analogy between the looks of the depicted person and the tiring, stressful job of a teacher. The obvious incongruity between the person's appearance and the

stated age triggers hyperbolization, makes for a humorous effect, and makes us interpret the caption as ironic.

Students vs teacher

The opposition student vs teacher has always been relevant, but during a traditional exam or a test the teacher normally controls the situation, while during distance learning there is no control over individual work. Students “act” collectively and solve examination tasks together. Group actions are common, uncontrolled, and generally unprovable.

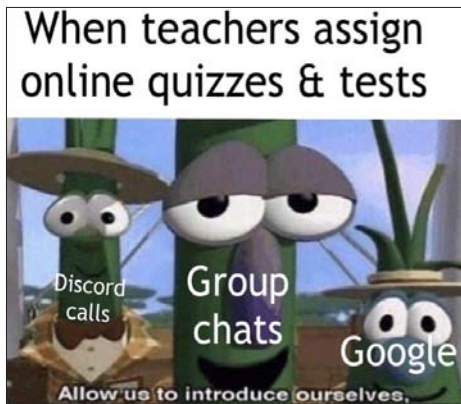


Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The meme (Fig. 13) represents what happens during online tests and quizzes. If the teacher was in control and made sure that the students worked on their own during the traditional exam, there is little they can do to ensure individual students’ work during online tests. “Allow Us To Introduce Ourselves” refers to an image macro (see *Allow Us To Introduce Ourselves*, n.d.) featuring a screen capture from the American animated television series *Veggie Tales*. The image, which features three anthropomorphic scallions saying the titular phrase, has been used as the punchline to various jokes. The Scallions are a trio gang—villains that joined together to commit crime. In this particular meme (Fig. 13) they represent Discord calls, Group chats and Google search—tools that students are inclined to use during tests and quizzes. Thus, internet tools are mapped to villains’ activity, and students using those applications during exams and tests are depicted as criminals, according to the metaphors: CHEATING ON TESTS IS COMMITTING CRIME, CRIME IS IMMORAL ACTION (Immoral action frame).

Those metaphors are also relevant for the next picture (Fig. 14) which reveals the issue of solidarity. “Apes Together Strong” is a memorable quote communicated using American sign language by the character Caesar in the 2011 science fiction film *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. A screenshot of the moment in which the phrase appears in the film later became a reaction image macro expressing solidarity (see *Apes Together Strong*, n.d.).

Graph of frame relations:

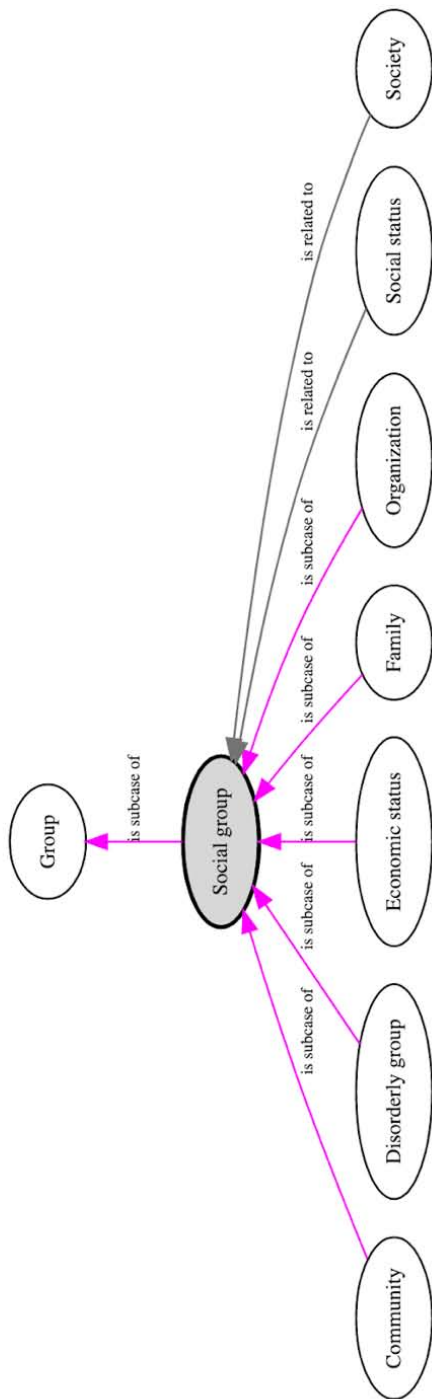


Fig. 15 Frame: Social group

The feeling of solidarity is mapped to the group work, and the students ‘act’ collectively solving examination tasks together. The popularity of Discord—an instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for creating communities to communicate with voice calls, video calls, text messaging, media and files in private chat (see Discord (software) 2021)—attracts students who want to collaborate during tests and quizzes. The primary metaphor SOCIAL GROUPS ARE CONTAINERS depicts how Discord is a bounded region with restricted access; in GROUPS ARE PART-WHOLE STRUCTURES, members are part of the group; SOCIAL GROUP IS A FAMILY whose members support each other (see Social group graph³).

Discord is a closed group (CONTAINER) with restricted access where its members help each other (as they do within a family) during difficult times, i.e. tests and quizzes.

Conclusions

Due to the 2020 pandemic of the coronavirus, distance learning has become a burning issue. Students and teachers alike struggled at some points with ambivalent emotions towards e-classes that might have brought about problems with miscommunication. On the basis of the discussed material, this study depicts how online learning is metaphorically visualised in internet memes and demonstrates how multimodality works in metaphors, highlighting the medium-specific affordances of the visual interaction. The analysis showed that Fire metaphors can be particularly appropriate in communication about common stressful situations such as tests and exams as well as about matters as complex as the COVID-19 pandemic. The frame ACQUIRING IDEAS IS EATING, UNDERSTANDING IS DIGESTING within the metaphor COMMUNICATING IS FEEDING, IDEAS ARE FOOD is depicted in several memes (Fig. 3, Fig. 6). Teachers struggled for students’ attention and involvement in the online classes (Fig. 8, Fig. 9), and the incongruity resulting from the comparison of the pictures of *Rocketman* vs Bernie Sanders and Swole Doge vs Cheems not only leads to a humorous effect but also shows that keeping students’ attention during distance learning is not as easy a task as many of us might have thought. Of course, memes are meant to be humorous and are thus prone to distorting reality, but the exaggeration of certain observations highlights challenges posed by distance learning.

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Reframing the reality of online learning on the basis of internet memes

Abstract

This paper sets out to investigate the interplay between image and text with reference to chosen cognitive models in order to pinpoint the image of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bilateral nature of memes is discussed in relation to the cognitive linguistics framework, in particular Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kovecses 2002, Forceville 1996, 2008, 2009), Frame Semantics (Fillmore 1988), construal (Langacker 1987, 2008), blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), and Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancyngier and Vandelanotte 2017).