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Memes as ensemble of illocutionary acts

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Abstract: As digital communication continues to shape discourse, memes have emerged as a potent tool for conveying messages. Previous studies on internet memes have focused on various aspects such as humor generation, speech acts, and political communication. Although there are studies on speech acts and memes, research specifically examining speech acts within subcultures is scarce. This paper aims to fill that gap by examining the illocutionary acts in political memes within a subculture. To understand how illocutionary acts function in memes, 50 political memes that appeared during the Kerala state assembly election were analyzed using the framework of speech acts. The analysis revealed that memes often contain multiple illocutionary acts. Additionally, it was observed that a single meme can encompass several illocutionary acts simultaneously. This study highlights the complexity and richness of political memes as a form of communication within subcultures, demonstrating how they can convey layered and multifaceted messages through the use of illocutionary acts.

Keywords: illocutionary acts; memes; political memes; speech acts

1 Introduction

The term “meme” was first introduced by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (Dawkins 2016). He described memes as a form of cultural propagation, where individuals transmit shared social memories or cultural ideas. With the advent of internet, memes became a common form of expression on early internet message boards, often deliberately incomprehensible to outsiders. However, as social media has become mainstream, so too have memes, with most social media users now familiar with common meme formats. While Dawkins’ definition is useful for understanding the spread of cultural ideas (rather than as a media form), modern internet memes possess distinct characteristics. Their rapid dissemination, constantly evolving visual formats, and the ease with which users can adapt them to

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their own perspectives are key features that make memes unique. Yet, this very adaptability complicates efforts to establish a singular definition.

A fundamental characteristic of memes is their ability to mutate, allowing those within a subculture to undergo multiple structural and functional transformations. Structural changes lead to the creation of hybrid memes, which combine various meme formats into one, based on Milner (2012) taxonomy of memes (Koickakudy and Karakunnel 2023). Functional changes, on the other hand, are influenced by content, form, and stance, as suggested by Shifman (2013). In this context, memes should be considered multimodal ensembles (Koickakudy and Karakunnel 2023), as they incorporate multiple semiotic resources such as photographs, movie screenshots, superimposed images, and text.

As Shifman (2013) argues, form, content, and stance are inherently memetic; when recreating a text, users can choose to imitate a particular position they find appealing or adopt an entirely different discursive orientation. In video memes, stance serves as a useful conduit for analyzing speech acts. Mnemonically, it is helpful to remember that stance in video memes heavily relies on the presence of speech. Conversely, in nonvideo examples, stance is intrinsically linked to content due to the relationship between the expression of ideology and the manner in which meaning-making is achieved without speech acts. This highlights (or elevates the importance of) the role of semiotics and intertextuality in nonvideo memes (Wiggins 2019). Content and stance merge given that the conveyance of ideas and ideologies occurs within deliberate semiotic and intertextual construction, especially with the absence of human speech. It is especially with image-based memes that ideological practice signifies the relationship between content and stance and that this merging is recursively constituted through agential interaction and memetic production. Stance becomes the location of semiotic and intertextual meaning alongside a certain ideological practice. It may be tempting to conclude that content houses the intertextual reference, but this would ignore the discursive power of individuals using memes to advance a particular position or issue, which is the essence of ideological practice constructed through semiotic and intertextual choices. The connection between content and stance is already present in video memes but is more pronounced – necessarily so – with memes that are devoid of human speech acts, especially when the meme is constructed as a critical response to real-world occurrence.

Semiotics within stance refers to the visual cues constructed to convey a specific meaning; this is distinct from Shifman's (2013) original articulation of content, which is concerned with the ideas and ideologies conveyed due to the poverty of the image to express itself in human speech. The bridge between stance and content is located in the manner by which content is to be understood. Content within the model merely demarcates what is conveyed, not what its import is or who or which groups

are addressed (interpellated) or marginalized. Content is the information, the data which the meme conveys. Stance is the deliberation on how that content should be (ideally) understood and which (imagined) audiences are addressed and which are ignored, marginalized, etc. With image-based (or simply, nonvideo) memes, it may be helpful to start not with content or stance but rather with form, then follow with the analysis with the knowledge proffered by a merging of the content and stance dimensions.

However, not all communication is verbal. As mentioned, communication can be either verbal or nonverbal, such as through facial expressions, body language, and gestures. Memes can also serve as a form of nonverbal communication (Grundlingh 2018). These nonverbal speech acts vary from culture to culture and are expressed in different ways. This study acknowledges that speech acts can also be nonverbal and interpreted in certain contexts without the use of written or spoken words.

An illocutionary act is performed with the intention that the hearer will correctly identify the act being performed. For this recognition to be successful, the speaker provides, through their words, a basis for the hearer to infer the intention of the act (Bach and Harnish 1979).

Despite being a powerful semiotic resource, illocutionary acts in memes remain largely unexplored, particularly in the context of subcultures. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the multiple illocutionary acts present in memes.

2 Memes and pragmatics

Yus (2019) analyzes a corpus of 100 image macro memes – characterized by a central image accompanied by text at the top and bottom – through a multimodal lens. The study focuses on categorizing these memes based on the relationship between text and image and how this interaction influences interpretation. The analysis assumes that different text-image combinations affect relevance by altering the balance between cognitive effects and mental effort. In some cases, increased cognitive effort is offset by additional cognitive effects, such as implied meanings.

Grundlingh (2018) asserts that memes can be understood as a form of speech act, aligning their possible functions with the communicative illocutionary acts identified by Bach and Harnish. Most of the functions of memes correspond to illocutionary acts, with many falling under the category of constative illocutionary acts. Grundlingh notes that fourteen of the fifteen subcategories of constatives align with different meme functions. Similarly, memes can be created to perform acts where the creator sincerely promises or offers to do something. Given the vast creative possibilities with memes, it is theoretically feasible to use memes to enact any illocutionary act identified by Bach and Harnish.

Osisanwo and Falade (2024) examined memes to highlight how creators utilize directives and references to engage in the social responsibility of informing and cautioning others online. Aligning with Mey's (2010) concept of directives – where a speaker's intention or communicative purpose carries a specific illocutionary force – meme creators perform various actions such as requesting, commanding, suggesting, and inviting. Similarly, their use of reference, as described by Mey (2010), allows them to identify, point to, or describe objects, events, and concepts through language. The analysis of COVID-19 memes, therefore, sheds light on how text-image ensembles function semiotically to communicate meaning.

Soh (2020) examines the pragmatics of meme circulation as a form of protest in Singapore, arguing that studying meme propagation is incomplete without considering the ideologies shaping their appropriation and recontextualization. In Singapore, internet memes function as pragmatic resistance, allowing users to evade sedition charges while enabling collective political expression. Intertextual links to prior enregistered uses of memes can influence their interpretation, with the prevailing stereotype of memes as frivolous content potentially undermining their political significance. This enregistered model can neutralize protest by reframing political memes as mere entertainment, threatening their recognition as a legitimate form of resistance.

Scott (2022) claims that internet memes, particularly object labeling memes like the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, are multimodal texts that thrive within participatory digital culture. By adding textual labels to images and sharing them, users create multimodal metaphors that function similarly to verbal metaphors in terms of interpretation. In this framework, memes serve as ostensive stimuli, carrying an expectation of optimal relevance. The effectiveness of multimodal metaphors in memes arises from their ability to generate a wide range of weak implicatures, based on the resemblance between the labeled objects in the image and their real-world referents. Additionally, a meme's significance is shaped by its connection to a broader meme family, allowing users to create variations that demonstrate digital and cultural literacy. Ultimately, Scott sees object labeling memes as a creative and efficient way for individuals to communicate messages while actively participating in online communities.

Martynyuk and Meleshchenko (2022) investigates multimodal metaphonymies in memes shared on X (formerly Twitter) following Trump's mugshot release. The analysis identifies varying levels of conceptual complexity, with some metaphonymies following a straightforward structure while others employ more intricate mappings. Three primary types of multimodal metaphonymies are observed: those where metonymy is embedded in either the metaphoric source or target, those

incorporating metonymy in both, and those where a metonymic chain structures the metaphoric source. By examining cognitive models of these structures, the study concludes that metonymy not only organizes the metaphor conveyed by a meme but also enhances clarity and reinforces meaning by generating vivid and easily interpretable imagery.

Osisanwo and Alugin (2024) explore how metaphors and semiotic resources are used in Yoruba-medium football commentary to describe English Premier League match results. The study reveals that metaphors drawn from Yoruba culture and everyday life are employed to create vivid and culturally resonant descriptions of game events, players, and teams. These metaphors not only enhance the narrative but also convey deeper cultural meanings and values, shaping the understanding and emotional engagement of football fans. The findings highlight the significant role of language and culture in sports discourse, demonstrating how metaphorical language enriches the experience of football fandom by framing the sport in unique and evocative ways.

Okesola and Oyebo (2023) explore how multimodal elements are used as appraisal resources in #EndSars protest-related memes on Nigerian social media platforms (WhatsApp and Twitter) to express affective meanings and intersubjective positioning. The study employs a qualitative analysis of thirty purposively selected Internet memes, collected between October and December 2020, using Martin and White's appraisal system and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework. The findings reveal that meme producers effectively utilize multimodal elements to project various expressions of affect, judgment, and appreciation, thereby creating important narratives that reflect the socio-political climate and public sentiment during the protest. The study concludes that these memes serve as powerful tools for digital activism, enabling Nigerian youths to voice their opinions and demand social change.

Oyemade and Adeagbo (2020) investigate the use of memes in the 2019 Nigerian presidential campaigns of Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar on Instagram. The study employs a combination of Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics and van Dijk's critical discourse analysis to examine how linguistic and nonlinguistic elements in memes convey ideological stances. The objective is to explore how these memes function as tools for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The findings reveal that both candidates used these strategies, with Buhari focusing on positive self-presentation to promote continuity, while Atiku emphasized negative other-presentation to undermine the incumbent. The study concludes that memes are effective in political advertising, leveraging multimodal resources to influence public perception and electoral outcomes.

Despite the growing body of research on internet memes, there is a notable gap in studies that specifically examine the use of illocutionary acts within memes in subcultures. While previous research has explored humor generation, speech acts, and political communication in memes, the intersection of speech acts and subcultural memes remains underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the illocutionary acts present in political memes within the subculture of Kerala during the state assembly election. The study aims to understand how these illocutionary acts function and convey complex messages, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of digital communication and meme culture.

3 Methodology

3.1 Framework

In 1955, John Austin proposed that utterances can function as actions rather than merely conveying information. He suggested that when someone speaks, they are not only stating something but also performing an act, such as making a commitment or offering an apology (Riley and Parker 2005). To explain this concept, Austin introduced a trichotomy to categorize speech acts into three types: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Austin 1975). A locutionary act involves the physical production of sounds and words, focusing on the act of saying something. An illocutionary act refers to the function or purpose of the speech, such as asserting, questioning, or commanding. The perlocutionary act, on the other hand, encompasses the effects – both intended and unintended – of an utterance on the listener (Austin 1975; Evans 2016).

Building on Austin's ideas, (Bach and Harnish, 1979) further elaborated on the trichotomy, while Searle (2002) placed particular emphasis on illocutionary acts. Searle argued that illocutionary acts could be classified into five broad categories: representatives, which convey information or describe reality; directives, which aim to influence the actions of others; commissives, which involve commitments to future actions; expressives, which express feelings or attitudes; and declarations, which bring about changes in the world through their very utterance (Searle 2002).

Austin's earlier classification of illocutionary acts shares similarities with Searle's framework but includes distinct categories. According to Austin, illocutionary acts could be divided into expositives, which involve acts such as stating, denying, or correcting; exercitives, which include warning, advising, or nominating; commissives, which entail promising, swearing, or planning; verdictives, which focus on acts of judgment such as ruling, valuing, or analyzing; and behabitives,

which express social attitudes like apologizing, thanking, or welcoming (Schiffrin 2005).

The recognition of illocutionary acts is essential for successful communication, as it guides the addressee's response. Schiffrin (2005) highlights that conversational expectations, whether implicit or explicit, play a crucial role in helping participants navigate interactions, facilitating appropriate responses, and identifying when communication breaks down.

Grundlingh (2018) asserts that memes can be understood as a form of speech act, aligning their possible functions with the communicative illocutionary acts identified by Bach and Harnish. Most of the functions of memes correspond to illocutionary acts, with many falling under the category of constative illocutionary acts. Grundlingh notes that fourteen of the fifteen subcategories of constatives align with different meme functions. Similarly, memes can be created to perform acts where the creator sincerely promises or offers to do something. Given the vast creative possibilities with memes, it is theoretically feasible to use memes to enact any illocutionary act identified by Bach and Harnish. However, Grundlingh's study focuses exclusively on image macros and reaction shots, leaving a gap in exploring other meme formats.

In this context, the study seeks to answer two specific questions.

- 1) What are multiple illocutionary acts in political memes?
- 2) How are memes an ensemble of illocutionary acts?

3.2 Method and sampling

For the purposes of this study, only the textual content of memes was analyzed to identify the various illocutionary acts present. The memes were uploaded to NVivo, and their text was coded using categories adapted from Bach and Harnish (1979). This analysis addresses the first research question and provides a basis for discussing the second research question, which examines how memes can be considered as an ensemble of illocutionary acts.

The sampling strategy for this study is adapted from the approach outlined in the paper by (McLoughlin and Southern 2021). Following a similar strategy for sampling, this study selected Malayalam-language meme groups based on their popularity and user activity. The chosen groups included *Troll Malayalam*, *Troll Kerala*, *International Chalu Union (ICU)*, and *Troll Republic*. These groups were selected not only for their traffic but also because they represented a mix of outspoken right-wing narratives and counter-narratives critiquing the BJP and Sangh Parivar. Memes were collected throughout the election period, from 26 February 2021 (the day the election was announced) to 5 April 2021 (the day before the election). A total corpus of over

2,000 memes was compiled, and from this dataset, memes with explicit references to the election were selected for analysis ($N = 307$). Of these, a subset of memes containing news screenshots was further narrowed down for detailed examination ($N = 50$). From the pool of 50 memes, 12 memes were purposively chosen to illustrate examples of specific illocutionary acts.

4 Results

4.1 Illocutionary acts in memes

It has been observed that the major illocutionary acts found in memes include Descriptives, Retrodictives, Assertives, Questions, Informatives, Responsives, Requestives, Suggestives, Prohibitives, Predictives, Conformatives, Advisories, Dissentives, Disputatives, Assentives, and Apologies.

For Bach and Harnish (1979), descriptives involve actions such as appraising, assessing, calling, categorizing, characterizing, classifying, dating, describing, diagnosing, evaluating, grading, identifying, portraying, ranking, among others.

In the analyzed set of memes, descriptives were the most frequently observed illocutionary acts. Unlike memes from other contexts, memes from Kerala tend to directly reference acts of categorizing, characterizing, classifying, describing, and identifying characters within the meme.

In Figure 1A analyzed features the name “Sreedharanji,” where the identity is established through the accompanying text. Similarly, in Figure 1B, two descriptive acts categorize people in the meme: one as “UDF,” a prominent political alliance in Kerala, and the other as “public.” In Figure 1C, the text identifies a person as *Vadakarayile Voter* (translating to “voters in Vadakara”).

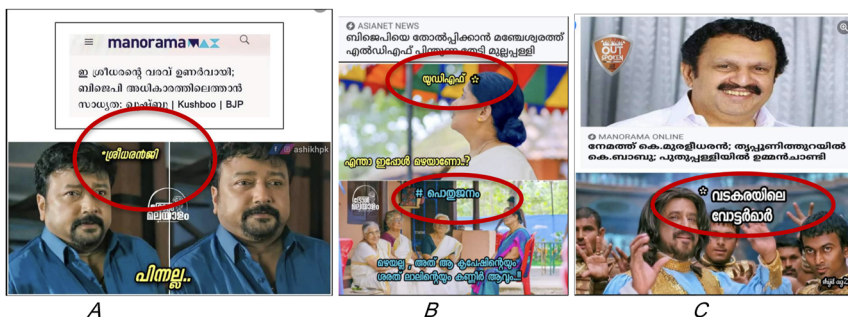


Figure 1: Memes with descriptives.

Such instances of descriptive acts were commonly observed in the set of memes analyzed. These included references to politicians such as E. Sreedharan, Rahul Gandhi, A.A. Rahim, Prathibha Hari, Mullappally Ramachandran, Oommen Chandy, Mohammed Riyas, Kunjammad Kutty, Pinarayi Vijayan, Narendra Modi, Rahna Fathima, and Rajnath Singh. Additionally, text in the memes was frequently used to categorize broader groups, such as “public,” “Malayalees,” or “voters.” An intriguing aspect of these memes is the integration of descriptive acts into the context of movie screenshots, often aligning the text with the character portrayed in the film.

Moore (1998) gives an informal definition of retrodictive that “describes some event that has been observed.” As the memes chosen for the study is “news reaction,” which has a news screen shot, the news content is classified in the study as retrodictive.



Figure 2: News screenshot in meme.

There were instances of retrodictives / reporting in the selected meme pool. There were news regarding campaigning, misogynic statements of politicians, candidature policy, and defection. Figure 2 shows an example of a meme with news screenshot. For this study, only memes with news screenshot were taken.

Assertive acts are phrases employed to form in the addressee a specific idea, proposition, or belief (e.g., “Out for a while,” “We won the game!”). Figure 3 highlights news about a candidate who promises to cover a girl child’s educational expenses. The text on the meme reads, “*Idehathe aanu aksharam thettate janasevakan ennu vilikkan pattuka,*” which translates to “*He can be called a politician beyond any doubt.*” These are always reactions to a news screenshot, in other words, an assertion in response to a retrodictive claim.

Speech acts containing questions are informally defined as those that seek information. A clear distinction exists between these and requisitives, where requests are framed as questions. Questions also appear in memes, where creators often



Figure 3: Example of assertive act in memes.

respond to news events through interrogative statements. This can be illustrated through a case where meme creators responded to specific news coverage.

Figure 4 is a meme with a news item about a Congress leader expressing willingness to adjust with the LDF (Left Democratic Front) to defeat the BJP in the Manjeshwaram constituency. The responding meme incorporates three movie screenshots alongside images of two Congress party workers who were allegedly killed by Communist party members. The meme poses pointed questions: “Can we now take these pictures?” followed by “Which pictures?” - creating a stark juxtaposition between the proposed political alliance and past violence.

Informatives also featured prominently in the analyzed memes. Informatives can be defined as statements that convey facts presumably unknown to the audience. Figure 5 incorporates a news screenshot reporting E Sreedharan’s claim that BJP has the potential to win 70 seats. This creates a scenario depicting a conversation between Sreedharan and a party worker, where he informs them about this possibility of securing 70 seats.



Figure 4: Example of questions seen in memes.

Responsives were another category of illocutionary acts observed in the meme pool. These are classified as replies, answers, or responses. Corresponding to the questions present in memes, there were also responsive elements, with 8 instances identified in the collective set of memes. For instance, Figure 5 demonstrates an example of Responsive.

The analyzed memes also contained requestatives. Requestatives include acts of asking, begging, beseeching, imploring, insisting, inviting, petitioning, pleading, praying, requesting, soliciting, summoning, supplicating, telling, and urging. These requestatives often emerged as responses to certain assertions within the memes. Six requestatives were identified in the meme set. Figure 6 features a news screenshot reporting the Election Commission's order to remove Modi's hoardings from petrol pumps. The meme responds by creating a fictional dialogue between Modi and the Election Commission, where Modi requests the implementation of this law, expressing concern about losing votes due to rising petrol prices. The translated text



Figure 5: Example of informatives and responsives in memes.



Figure 6: Example of requestatives in memes.

reads: “If they see my photo, my existing vote base will also go. So could you please ask to remove my photos?”

Suggestives were observed in the memes selected for analysis. A suggestive is defined as a claim indicating there is reason to believe a particular fact. In the context of memes, suggestives are typically employed alongside scenario-based contexts. For example, in the referenced meme, a news screenshot criticizing the Communist party for selling seats is paired with a movie screenshot. This creates a scenario with a suggestive element implying “meanwhile Pinarayi in AKG centre Figure 7.

Advisories are speech acts that advise hearers to take specific actions. In the context of election memes, advisories typically relate to voting behavior. Among the analyzed set of memes, only one instance of an advisory was observed.

Figure 8 features a news item about BJP leaders visiting the Cardinal. A comment attached to the meme reads, “Christians should be careful enough with their votes, if not you will have to face consequences.” This is followed by a movie screenshot with the text “Be careful when you are voting.”



Figure 7: Example of suggestives in memes.

The analyzed set of memes also contained two confirmatives, which are defined as statements telling someone something they already know. One example was the slogan “our dear leader” appearing in a meme, while the other confirmative act was the statement “My job is gone.”

Predictions and prohibitives were also observed in the meme set. Prohibitives focused on politicians preventing women from contesting elections, while predictives centered on forecasting the number of seats in the election. Additionally, single instances of apologies, assentives, disputatives, and dissentives were identified in the meme collection.



Figure 8: Example of advisories in memes.

Illocutionary acts	Reference seen in memes
Descriptives	Public Malayalees Sreedharanji E Sreedharan Mithram Voter Raga Rahim UDF Public PJ Army RSS Prathibha Hari Rascal

(continued)

Illocutionary acts	Reference seen in memes
	Mullapalli Muslim League Asaraf Ommen Chnadi Vanitha League worker League Leadership Asaraf Puthupalli Sister Tea Maker Riyas Luttappi Kunjammad Kutti Pinarayi Luttappi Luttappi Voters in Vadakara Public Commie Pinarayi Vijayan Brother Election commission Modi Rahna Fathima Comrades Singh Pinarayi Media One Congress Sudappi Thangal and co Valayar Mother Commies
Retrodictives	People in Kerala can eat beef, Kumanam Rajashekharan, in election manifesto LDF accused of influencing voters by giving pensions along with postal vote LDF accused of influencing voters by giving alcohol Mullappali seeks support of LDF in Manjeshwaram to defeat BJP CM's poster tarnished in Vadakara Election is not to milk society; Arif MLA mocks Prathibha Hari Mullappali seeks support of LDF in Manjeshwaram to defeat BJP You study, I will fund you. Anoop Antony takes responsibility for the education of a girl child during the campaign

(continued)

Illocutionary acts	Reference seen in memes
	Mullappali seeks support of LDF in Manjeshwaram to defeat BJP
	We don't need two hearts; we only need one good heart. Drishyam lawyer campaigning for UDF candidate
	Sunni leader warns league not to contest women in elections
	Muslim League demands three more seats in the election
	Samastha continues with strong dissent. No Muslim women candidate in the league
	Who sold the Kunnathunad seat for 30 crores? Dissent posters in CPM
	Made Candidate without consent, Candidate in Manadavadi withdraws nomination
	4 rama's contesting in vadakara
	KK Rama against KK Rama; pseudo candidates in Vadakara
	CM is a great man. Will not contest in any election, says P Jayarajan
	The first election without my father, I can now understand the stress. Jose K. Mani writes an emotional letter
	KP Kunjamadkutty will contest in kuttiyadi
	KP Kunjamadkutty will contest in kuttiyadi
	K Muraleedharan in Nemom, K babu in Trippunithara, Ommen chandi in Puthupalli
	We won't vote if the Candidate is not Bindu Krishna. Women League Workers protests
	CPI leader now NDA candidate in harippadu
	CPM leader contesting as NDA candidate in Cherthala
	Election Commission declares inquiry in 140 constituencies regarding double vote
	CPM files complaint against Ramesh Chennithala for leaking personal details of voters
	Ramesh Chennithala will file a complaint against the government
	The government distributes rice, which was held for 7 months; the opposition claims this move is for the vote
	Modi hoardings should be removed within 75 hours; the election commission
	The left stands with religious practices; we only enforced the court order.
	Kodiyeri Balakrishnan
	MA Baby says the Sabarimala stand cannot be applicable in today's society
	BJP doesn't seek vote based on religion or caste; Rajnath Singh
	Narendra Modi's chanting is part of his belief, and he will never question it.
	Thomas Issac
	LDF plans to ask KC Rosakutty to campaign in Christian-dominated areas
	CPM Sabarimala stands in the limelight during the election
	The left stands with religious practices, and we only enforced the court order.
	Kodiyeri Balakrishnan
	Muslims represented less in the congress candidate list

(continued)

Illocutionary acts	Reference seen in memes
Informatives	How many stands have you taken about Sabarimala? Jocker? What is my role? What is your slogan? Are there symbols like this?
	We can quickly get 70 seat Kripesh and Sharathalal see this from heaven He can go to any extent to ensure the freedom of women in some other space at the same time meantime, relatives of EP Jayarajan Look, CPM leader moves to BJP I did it without any sleep This was taken from the website of the Election commission everyone will mock me if I say
	Yes, the one who wins will be the opposition candidate this is not rain; this could be the tears of Sharthlal and Kripesh don't insult me by saying this This is election right, so I came to get some votes This photo He can be called a public servant yes
	Shall I contest the election Please ask them to remove my hoardings from petrol bunks Could you tell me one thing once the election is over Vote for ayyappan please don't say that
	Meanwhile, Pinarayi in the AKG center The election is not yet over, right Go as you said before
	Christians should be careful with the votes; if not, you will face consequences Be careful while voting
	our favorite leader My job is gone
	It is possible to get 70 seat
Predictives	That won't be possible for us don't be scared even after saying you are sure
Prohibitives	Sorry, I just thought I was in Kerala
Apologies	What sort of a person are you? They were ruling Kerala for years
Disputatives	Stop disturbing the drinking water supply of commoners!
Dissentives	

4.2 Memes as ensemble of illocutionary acts

The previous section explored multiple illocutionary acts present in the corpus of memes. This section demonstrates how memes function as an ensemble of illocutionary acts. The concept of ensemble derives from multimodality, where “multimodal ensemble” refers to representations or communications consisting of more than one mode, brought together deliberately to create collective and interrelated meaning. However, this paper uses “ensemble” in its basic sense: “a group of things taken together as a whole.”

I argue that memes are an ensemble of illocutionary acts. Grundling argued that memes could function as speech acts, stating that memes correspond to most of the communicative illocutionary acts identified by Bach and Harnish, as these functions are also illocutionary acts. While certain memes may have a single communicative purpose, political memes typically contain multiple illocutionary acts within a single meme. This analysis focuses specifically on the ensemble of illocutionary acts, rather than other modes like images or color, to identify how memes constitute an ensemble of illocutionary acts. This framework will help explain the memes used as examples in the previous section.

Figure 9 contains five illocutionary acts: retrodictives, descriptives, questions, descriptives, and a responsive. It begins with a news screenshot reporting UDF's willingness to align with LDF to defeat BJP in Manjeshwaram. Following this is the text “UDF,” identifying the political alliance. The next element is a question, presented by a character representing UDF, asking “is it raining now?” The public responds that it must be the tears of Sharathlal and Kripesh.

Understanding such memes requires comprehending both the combination of illocutionary acts and their political context. Kripesh and Sharath Lal were two Youth Congress Leaders from Periya, Kasargod, who were murdered on February 17, 2019.

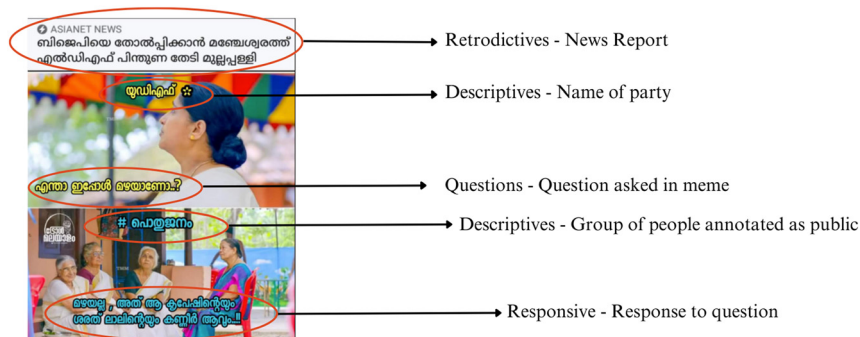


Figure 9: Retrodictives, descriptives, questions and responsive seen in a single meme.

Their deaths were politically motivated, resulting from clashes between CPI(M) and Congress workers. The victims were ambushed and killed while riding their motorcycles on Echiladukkam Road. The constituency mentioned, Manjeshwaram, is in the same district where these murders occurred. Thus, the news of Congress planning to ally with LDF is directly connected to these murders.

In this scenario, memes function as an ensemble of illocutionary acts, with the acts combining to create an overall meaning. Here, the meme in its entirety can be considered a dissensive as it expresses dissent against a political party's stance.

Figure 10 contains three illocutionary acts: retrodictives in the news report, descriptives in the form of names, and apologies in the text. The meme begins with Rahul Gandhi's statement that "people in LDF are my brothers." To understand the meaning created by these illocutionary acts, both the political context and the popular movie screenshot must be interpreted.

In Kerala, a Communist candidate opposes Congress locally, while both parties are allied at the national level. The meme incorporates a movie scene where a military officer visits a temple. According to Indian tradition, bursting crackers is a common part of cultural and religious celebrations. When the officer hears the crackers, his military instincts take over, and he commands everyone to take cover, mistaking the sounds for gunfire. Upon realizing his error, he apologizes, saying, "Sorry, I thought I was at the border."

This scenario is adapted to Rahul Gandhi's campaign in Kerala, where his statement about left-wing "brothers" contradicts local political reality. The dialogue is modified to "Sorry, I thought I was outside Kerala," with the combination of illocutionary acts creating humor through this parallel.

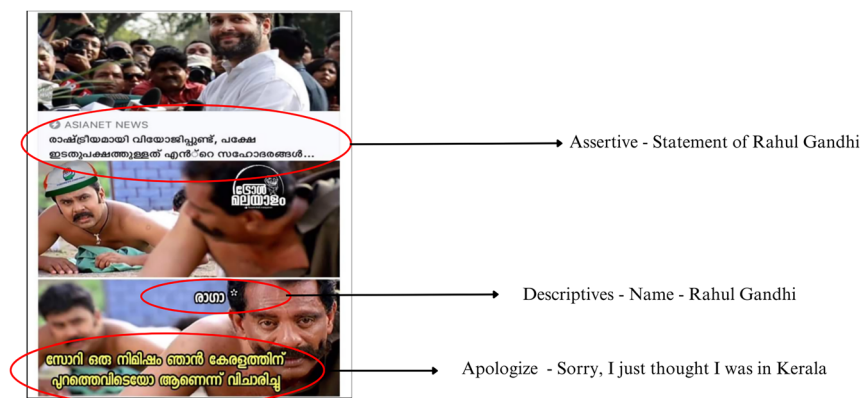


Figure 10: Assertives, descriptives and apologies in memes.

5 Conclusions

There are multiple studies that discuss the pragmatics of memes, analyzing them as speech acts with a particular focus on directives and references. This paper adds to the growing body of research on memes and pragmatics by examining the illocutionary acts observed in memes and arguing that memes should be understood as ensembles of illocutionary acts. This alternative perspective, which views memes as an ensemble of illocutionary acts, is proposed as a necessary approach since traditional memetics may not always effectively capture the nuanced communicative functions of memes.

Existing studies have highlighted directives and references in memes, but this analysis identifies a broader range of illocutionary acts, including Apologetives, Assentives, Disputatives, Dissentives, Advisories, Conformatives, Predictives, Prohibitives, Suggestives, Requestives, Responsives, Informatives, Questions, Assertives, Retrodictives, and Descriptives. By categorizing these acts, the study demonstrates the richness and complexity of meme communication, showing that memes do not rely on a singular communicative function but often operate across multiple illocutionary acts simultaneously.

The discussion emphasizes the importance of understanding memes through the lens of both pragmatics and semiotics, as these fields offer critical insights into their linguistic and communicative dimensions. While previous studies have suggested that the communicative functions of memes align with the illocutionary act categories established by Bach and Harnish (1979), this paper moves beyond that perspective. It argues that a single meme can encapsulate several illocutionary acts, underscoring the multifaceted nature of memes as speech acts.

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Appendix

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Bionote

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