

The Speech Act of English and Arabic Racial Memes of Covid19

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Abstract

A meme is a caption image that consists of an image and a witty message which reflects worldwide current incidents. Since the outbreak, Covid19 has received its own share of memes by fueling a pile – on excuses to promote racism on Asian's and particularly the Chinese community as being the major cause of the pandemic. The present study aims to investigate racial memes of (24) English memes and (10) Arabic memes. To achieve this, a pragmatic multimodal approach has been adopted to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- To what category does the speech act “racialize” belong to?
- 2- Are racial intentions expressed equally in English and Arabic memes?
- 3- Is there any difference in the frequency of racial humor in English and Arabic memes?
- 4- Which category of text – image combination is more frequently used in English and Arabic memes?

The findings of the study, show that the speech act of racialize belongs to expressive illocutionary acts since it expresses a negative psychological state of mind and has down face since it is not accepted by everyone. Although, Covid19 memes in English and Arabic sometimes share the same caption and image but the racial intention in English memes are reflected through dark humor unlike Arabic memes which are mostly humorous.

Keywords: Memes, Covid 19, Speech acts, Expressive, Racial intention

1. Introduction

A meme is an idea, behavior or style that spreads from one person to another via net. Not only that, memes combines elements such as creativity, messages and humor all put together in one package to express feelings, criticize certain up-to-date situations and represent current conditions in an entertaining way. Moreover, because of its loaded embedded features memes are easily spread through Facebook, twitter, Instagram all over the world in different

languages. During the outbreak of Covid19, a flood of memes appeared pointing at the Asian community in general and the Chinese in particular since the pandemic started there. These memes were mostly embedded with racial humor reference about the Chinese or Asians whether in English or Arabic memes, i.e., in both languages Chinese people were the main focus of the memes.

Thus, based on the researcher's internet an analysis of Covid19 English and Arabic macro memes will be investigated within the framework of multimodality and speech act. Multimodality because memes are a combination of image and text and since the text carries a message to the addressee it is studied within speech acts. Since the later deals with verbal and non-verbal (i.e., memes) commutation. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following research questions: constitutes.

1- What category does "racialize" belongs to?

2- How is the speech act racializing expressed in English and Arabic memes?

3- Is there any difference in the frequency of racial humor in English and Arabic memes?

4- Which category of text – image combination is more frequently used in English and Arabic Covid19 memes.

The research constitutes a novel approach to memes because it examines memes using speech acts, multimodality, humor and racism altogether. Thus, in the following sections previous studies concepts of memes, racial ethnic humor, memes and humor, multimodality, speech acts and much more will be explained with the analysis then the conclusion on Covid19 memes in English and Arabic.

2. Previous Studies

Since the appearance of memes in the internet, many studies have been presented whether sociolinguistically, pragmatically (i.e., speech act of expressive), or with reference to multimodality, or even with reference to racism. However, the researcher will refer to those related to our study.

The first one is by Widiana (2016) "A sociopragmatic study on social criticism in memes comics". The researcher takes harsh words and swearing words in meme comics for adults. These memes as he puts are used to express social criticism including sex, gender, education, etc.. with a stative framework.

The second one is by Yoon (2016) "Why is it not just a joke? Analysis of internet memes with racism and hidden ideology of colorblindness". The researcher finds out that a majority of meme creators and commenters misunderstand not only the meaning of racism and racial issues but also the detrimental impact on some people. Moreover, he suggests that teaching students race and racism is a way to counter racial injustice through creating counter memes.

The third one is by Williams et al (2016) "entitled" Racial macroaggressions and perceptions of internet memes". In their study, they investigated how participants respond to subtle racial

bias that is manifested online. They found out that people of color expressed offensiveness in racial themed internet memes which was the exact contrast with white participants.

The fourth study is by Grundingh (2017) “Memes as speech act”. In her study, pragmatics offers information on how memes could function as speech acts. Moreover, she adds that the functions of memes fit into most of the the communicative illocutionary act categories distinguished by Bach and Hurnish (1980).

The fifth study is by Stojchevska and Shalveska (2018) “Internet memes and their sociolinguistic features”. In their study, memes have numerous linguistic characteristic, i.e., abbreviations, puns, intentional and unintentional mistakes which causes confusion to non-English speakers. Moreover, mistakes and similar language features are also found in memes created in Macedonian. Thus, in both languages English and Macedonian similar sociolinguistic features are noticed.

The sixth study is Sari (2018) a thesis entitled “Meanings of lifestyle memes in English: pragmatic – semiotic analysis”. In this thesis thirty-five memes were analyzed through image, caption, interpretation and meaning. He also noticed that the memes according to meaning were divided into four categories working, shopping, health and social media.

Also, all types of speech acts were found in his data except declarative speech acts.

The seventh study is by Gumilang (2018) “Interpretation of meme conversation using multimodality analysis”. In the study, memes deliver a message of entertainment through humor by combining a message (i.e., text) in a form of a visual image accepted by internet users globally.

Thus, after reviewing the literature related to the researcher’s topic no study was found that had a combination of multimodality, ethnic racism, pragmatics and particularly the verb racialize within the illocutionary act of expressive all unwrapped together.

3. The Concept of Memes

The word “meme” goes back to Richard Dawkins in his book 1976 “the selfish gene” as an attempt to explain how ideas replicate mutate and evolve (i.e., memetic). the concept later on was used again but this time in the internet “i.e., internet memes” which was proposed by Mike Goodwin 1993, whom characterized a meme as being creative such as smile faces (via net Wikipedia). However, Patrick Davidson (2009:122) in his essay “the language of internet memes” gave a definition saying that:

An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission]

Furthermore, an internet meme is a group of digital items (such as videos, images, Gifs, etc.....) that share common characteristics such as (a) It produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed and rapidly diffused by countless participants. (b) It shares common content from and/ or stance, which were created with awareness and were circulated via net.

(c) It consists of a complex, multi-layered and intertextual combination of (moving) picture and text that is disseminated by the active agency of internet users (Yus:1)

Shifman (2014:18) believes that internet memes are “cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. He also states that the mechanism of any meme might either be mimicry which involves recreating a specific text by different people and remixing which is a new strategy that refers to technological-based manipulation such as photo shopping or adding sound image (Yoon, 2016: 96). However, Milner (2012:85) divides memes into three major types and each type has several categories: single memes (annotated and text), stacked images (rage comic and stated skills) and finally stable images (drawings, graphs, memes ‘IRL’, photos and screenshots). As our concern in this paper is about memes, we will only take image macros which are “captioned images that typically consist of picture and a witty message or a catchphrase (Brown, 2012). Then what happens to a macro if it’s used over and over, simply it becomes a standard image like the success kid or Hani Ramzi (Egyptian actor) (Grundingh, 2017: 11)

4. Memes and Humor

Humor has been studied in many fields like psychology, sociology, philosophy, literature as well as linguistics. This is because humor is considered to be the core of everyday interactions in our lives. Monro (1988: 349) defines humor as a term which may be used in both a wide and narrow sense. In a wider sense, it is applied to all literature in informal speech or writing in which the object is to amuse, or rouse laughter in the reader or hearer. In its narrow sense, humor is distinguished from wit, satire and farce being considered with character and situation than with words alone. (Yuli, 72) However, humor has also found its way in online communication either by memes or jokes. Shifman (2014:390) believes that internet humor is “any type of humorous interaction or performance that is manifest on the internet”. He also adds (2007: 201) that internet-related shifts in humor is heavily based on visual firmaments rather being verbalized which can be quicker and easily across the world. Therefore, memes are created to deliver humor whether by conversations, catchphrases or pictures which are all very effective to build some kind of joke. Thus, even a very serious matter like the corona virus epidemic 2020 could turn into a joke when it’s delivered by using a meme. However, not all memes during this epidemic were for the sake of a good laugh most of them had negative connotation, i.e., an ethnic connotation whether directly or indirectly.

5. Racial Ethnic Humor

Before going into relation of humor and ethnic racism, it is necessary to shed light on what is the difference between ethnicity and racism. The traditional definition of race and ethnicity is related to biological and sociological factors respectively. Race refers to a person’s physical characteristics, such as bone structure and skin, hair, or eye color. Ethnicity, however, refers to cultural factors, including nationality, regional culture, ancestry and language. An example of race is white, brown, or black skin while an example of ethnicity is Arabic, Spanish,

Turkish or Chinese, i.e., your race depends on how you look while your ethnicity depends on the social and cultural group you belong to (www.diffen.com).

Now, humor in general has two sides: Positive and negative. The positive one is that piece of humor whether a joke, meme, video etc. makes the audience laugh, i.e., it is just a funny sketch for everyone. While a negative humor often reflects offensiveness and has a bad influence on a particular group of audience, i.e., a joke on black slaves by using the ‘N’ word is alright when said by a black person but reflects racism when said by a white person.

Thus, racial ethnic humor is defined as “humor directed at racial and nationality groups, denigrating alleged attributes of those groups (Schutz, 1997: 167). Weaver (2010) uses the term “racist humor” and explains that “where humor has a racist potential, in relation to stereotype and inferiorization used it remains accurate to label it racist humor” (Yoon, 97-88).

Therefore, our study helps in understudy the role of racial ethnic humor used on the Chinese in particular and the Asians in general in covid19 memes.

6. Racial Ethnic Memes During the Corona Outbreak

In this part, we are going to link the corona virus (Covid19 or the kung flu) disease with racial ethnic discrimination about Chinese through internet memes.

At the beginning, what is corona virus and what has it to do with Chinese population? During the end of 2019, a virus started in the city of Wuhan China, people thought it was a simple flu but in no time, people started to fall in the streets. After an examination of some cases, it appeared that it was not an ordinary flu but a virus known as the corona virus which was caused as some believe by eating bats and snakes. Others, however, thought that the virus was a conspiracy on China because of its economic development. Anyhow, this virus became pandemic in 2020 and had all over the world causing an increase number of deaths and a worldwide lockdown.

Moreover, because this virus came from China an increase in prejudice, xenophobia, discrimination, violence and racism against Chinese people were noticed all over the globe. One of the ways to show this racial ethnic discrimination was through internet memes. These memes, however, reflected a racial ethnic intention about the Chinese whether implicitly or explicitly. Therefore this leads us to speech acts and in particular the intention behind the expressive speech act of internet meme.

7. What Is Racist Language?

Racist language an integral part of any language is culture which reflects the societies attitude and thinking. He also believes that racism started from the white culture as being superior to the inferior countries, for example the ‘N’ word was used to refer to slaves but still used now so is the word ‘chink’ which was used by the US troops in Vietnam and is still used.

Moreover, Schwarts (2001:3) states that through language one can commit offensive, racist and violent acts depending on one’s intention. Similar to Moore, the dominate culture of

whiteness is the cause and reason for the racist outcome. Thus, racist language often uses words or phrases to create an undesirable stereo type which is often hidden or implicit.

In the corona virus epidemic, racist language was very obvious and a very explicit one was when the American president Trump in his conference about the epidemic called it “the Chinese flu”. Thus, some called the virus corona, Chinese but now it is known as Covid19. In our research paper, however, racial ethnic memes start to pop out all over the net whether implicitly or explicitly about the Chinese community. This was clearly shown on what was written with the meme. However, although covid19 memes showed a racial side towards the Asians it was coated in a humorous style in order to reduce the racial effect and this is what the researcher is after.

8. Multimodality and Text Image

The term Multimodality has been used for over thirty years but nowadays it has become increasingly important due to the extensive use of internet which has combined different modes of communication, i.e. text, picture, video, audio, memes, etc. Anyhow, to support the importance of Multimodality and its relation to internet many definitions have been given but all can be summarized as the following:

- (a) All form of communication is Multimodal
- (b) Analysis focusing on language only cannot account for meaning adequately.
- (c) Each mode is specific from its material and social history which shapes the communicative need.
- (d) Modes are together units to shape a whole communication for example in memes the picture with text is important to give the final idea about that meme (Jewitt, 2014 cited in Yus, 2018: 2).

Moreover, because of the extensive use of visuals on internet there emerges an interaction between verbal language and visual language. This interaction is known as the text image relation. Theories on this relation have been built on cohesion which is a non-structural resource for the construction of any text (Haliday and Hassan 1976). Thus, the idea about Multimodality cohesive relation is that the linguistic text has a connection with the image text and together they create a text image relation (Zhang, 2017: 7)

In addition, Royce (2007) noticed that the relation between both visual and verbal language complete each other and produces a single relation known as intersemiotics. He also refers that there are three types of intersemiotics

- (a) Visual to verbal relation
- (b) Visual to visual relation and finally
- (c) Intravisual relation.

Thus, through these divisions Royce was able to discover how the components of language within a multimodal structure interact with each other. (Zhang, 2017: 8-9)

Our study however, is going to focus on the visual to verbal relation which is important to understand internet racial ethnic memes mostly depending on Yus (2018) model of text-picture combinations in macro memes. In his model, Yus gave seven categories (2017, 5-7).

- 1- Word specific, where pictures illustrate but do not add to the text.
- 2- Picture specific, where the picture dominates and words do not add.
- 3- Duo specific, where words and pictures send the same message.
- 4- Additive, where the words elaborate on the picture and vice-versa.
- 5- Parallel, where words and pictures follow different paths without meeting.
- 6- Montage, where words are treated as an integral part of the given picture.

7- Interdependent, where pictures and words convey together to give an idea which neither would be understand alone.

9. Pragmatics, Humor, Racism and Memes

Yule (2006, 112) describes pragmatic as the study of “what the speaker means” and gives emphases to communication which depends on not only recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance but recognizing what the speakers mean by their utterance. Thus, when we understand the meaning of a text written or spoken, we rely on the intention which plays an important role in understanding the utterance. Moreover, Bach and Harnish (1980: 5) believe that the understanding of an utterance depends on mutual contextual beliefs which are not only shared between speaker and hearer but speaker, hearer and members of the linguistic community at large.

The linguistic community is:

- 1- Members that share the same language.
- 2- Share background information with some recognizable illocutionary event through speech acts (Grundingh, 2017, 7).

Now, let’s suppose that the context has humor, so what do we expect. In general, any humorous context should appeal to the intellect rather than emotions. Thus, humor can be hilarious for some and rude to others which might give a positive or negative effect on the audience, i.e., the hearer and linguistic community. However, whatever the topic is “humor” is used to get people to pay attention to a pressing issue or to see the absurdity of the status quo (Abdulhakeem and Mubarak 2019, 773).

Moreover, Koller (1988, 18) believes that humor can be used for many purposes which are achieved by means of pragmatics and particularly speech acts. The most common uses of humor are many but the researcher only referred to four which have relation with racism:

- 1- Humor can be used for expressing hostility.

- 2- Humor can be used for reducing hostility.
- 3- Humor can be used for replacing anger.
- 4- Humor can be used for relieving stress.

Thus, the intended meaning of the above are uses of humor that are determined by the context of situation which is mostly understood within a pragmatic context in general and the speech act context in particular since in every utterance illocution is the crux whether presented directly or indirectly.

The understanding of interpreting the meaning of the speech act meme, it is very important that the hearer is aware of the background information which in the case of memes is the non-verbal aspect “the photo” which goes hand in hand to provide the correct message of the given meme with its intended illocutionary force.

10. Speech Acts of Memes

In the famous book “How to do things with words”, Austin (1962) suggested that some utterance led to perform an act. Thus, when you say an utterance you are doing something as well, e.g. giving an apology, asking for an offer, requesting for something, etc. Moreover, to empower his point he presented a trichotomy that happens with each utterance: the locutionary act (which refers to the production of sounds and words), the illocutionary act (which refers to the performance of one of the functions of language, e.g.: invitation, warn, threat, plea etc.) and the perlocutionary act (which refers to the intended and unintended results of something said).

Later on, Searle (1979) focus on speech acts and especially the illocutionary act and classified it into five types: Assertives (commit the speaker to something), Directives (attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something), Commissive (commit the speaker to some future course of action), Expressives (express the psychological state) and Declaratives (changes the reality). In which, all of these types deal with verbal speech.

However, according to Grundlingh (2017, 25) states that not all speech is verbal; there is non-verbal speech such as “Memes”. She supports her point by saying that a meme is a speech act since it has two characteristics. Intention and Context.

Bach and Harnish (1980: 5 cited in Grundigh (2017)) focus on the importance of any successful communication through the relation between “intention and inference” in which the hearer infers to what the intention of the act is. Moreover, they believe that an utterance could have more than one influence based on the mutual contextual beliefs. Thus, through this mutual agreement the intention of the speaker with the importance of the role of the context, i.e., the background information which is reflected through the context which can conclude the physical and social context, general knowledge, world knowledge and finally personal knowledge. All of these lead to the understanding of the illocutionary act. To make it short, when understanding the meaning of a meme it is important to be aware of the background information, i.e., non-verbal aspect (the photo of the meme) and the verbal aspect, i.e., what is mentioned?

Now, the question that needs an answer: are all memes jokes as Grundingh (2017) believes since they violate the illocutionary act because as she puts it there is no intention to carry the act. Here the researcher believes that not all the memes are jokes. A meme can be racial with the intention of discriminating, doesn't violate the illocutionary act and therefore is an expressive speech act meme.

11. Expressive Illocutionary Act

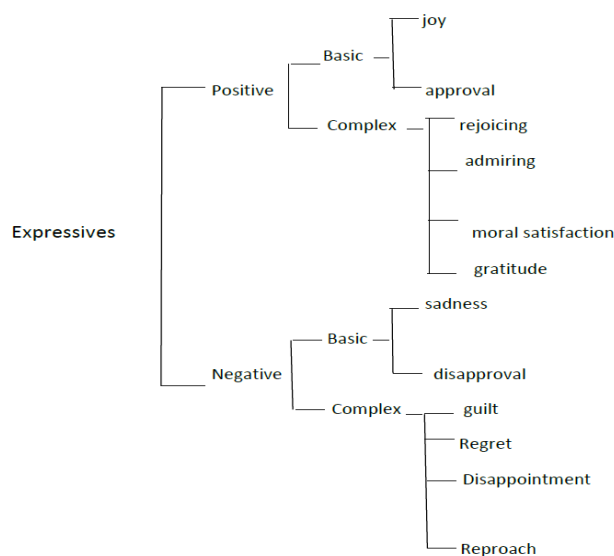
According to the researcher, memes which have the intention of showing racism is an expressive speech act. As we have mentioned before, expressive speech act expresses the psychological state of mind, e.g. blame, apologize, thanks, etc. Moreover, in expressives there is no direction of fit which means people saying an expressive are neither trying the world to match word or vice-versa (Searle, 1979).

Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 211) also added that expressive speech and verbs usually express good or bad evaluations and it is hearer centered, which means it depends on what types of effect the utterance has on the hearer.

Walander et al (2015: 4 cited in Yoon, 2016: 66), states that expressive speech acts have the potential of bringing down the faces, for example not everyone can accept a criticism, an accusation and even a racial inference.

As for the function of expressives, Norrick (1978: 283) creates a scheme where he presents eight subgroups: Apologizing, congratulating, condoling, deploring, lamenting, welcoming, forgiving and boosting. In his scheme, the items could have a negative or positive effect, e.g., in Apologizing, the speaker expresses negative feelings toward the addressee to appease them. In condoling, the speaker has observed that the addressee has either benefitted from or carried out a negative valued event.

Later on, Guirard et al, (2011) formalized the subgroups of expressives in a formal-cognitive approach within a modal logic of communication. Thus, they believe that expressives are public expressions of emotional states outlined by the cognitive structure of the negative or positive emotions accompanied with the speech act. Moreover, they divide emotions into two types: basic and complex (see the table below):



Now, how does the word “racialize” fit into expressives? First it expresses a psychological negative state of mind. Second, it depends on the hearer if it has a good or bad evaluation. Thirdly it brings down face since it is not accepted by everyone. Fourthly, according to Guirand et al., (2011) subgroups of expressives, racialize is a negative/ basic/ disapproval. Thus, when the speaker utters on utterance which has a racial meaning, he has a negative intention which reflects his disapproval about the hearer. Thus, disapproval defined as an agent (speaker) expressing disapproval to the hearer about something that is not considered ideal (Ronan, 2015: 31), i.e., it is not considered ideal to the speaker. This means that a racial expression shows the psychological negative state of the speaker by considering the hearer NOT ideal in comparison with the speaker himself. Furthermore, similar to all five types of speech acts, expressives can either be direct or indirect.

1- Direct:

A direct speech act is one which expresses the word literally whether by a statement, questions, command or request e.g., can you close the door?

2- Indirect:

An indirect speech act is expressed in a sentence mode by not referring to the verb directly, e.g., you left the door open.

Now, as for the expressive verb “racialize” it can be direct mostly in a statement and question, e.g.:

1- Mary racializes ever Asian she sees.

2- Is she racializing me?

Which means that it never occurs as a request or command. As for the indirect form, they are plenty, e.g.:

1- Can you open your eyes when you talk to me, Asian?

2- “N” word

3- Hey Pocahontas, move your big head so I can see.

In the three utterances, there is a clear indirect reference of racialism, i.e. the first was to a Chinese, the second to a black skinned person and the third to the red Indians.

12. Data Analysis

In this part, the data is going to be divided into two parts. The first part is for memes in English while the second is for memes in Arabic. In each part, the memes will be subdivided into indirect and direct reference to racism while being subdivided to Yus’ model (2018) with thorough explanation.

A- English memes during Covid19

Through checking the memes that appeared during the outbreak of covid19 many memes were indirect expressives. However, indirect memes have also had its fair share either by using the direct word “racist” or by racist words such as ‘kung’ or by presenting a Chinese person in the meme. However, below are the subdivisions of the most common English memes in the outbreak of covid19 with thorough explanation of why the meme is direct or indirect.

1. Word specific

In this category, the pictures illustrate but do not add to the text. In meme (1) which has a direct reference to the Chinese that they eat every living creature. Meme (2) also is a direct reference to China as being the cause of corona virus plus making fun that everything made in China does not last. Meme (3) also a direct reference to Chinese as being the cause of corona virus for eating a “Bat”. However, all three have an indirect expressive reference to the Chinese which is considered racism. In meme (4) and (5) there is a clear direct reference to racism (i.e., racial words which refer to the Chinese society), through using words such as “kung, ching chong and haching hachong”. These words somehow refer to the sound the Chinese use. In these memes, a direct expressive reference to Chinese with direct racism is quietly obvious.



2. Picture specific

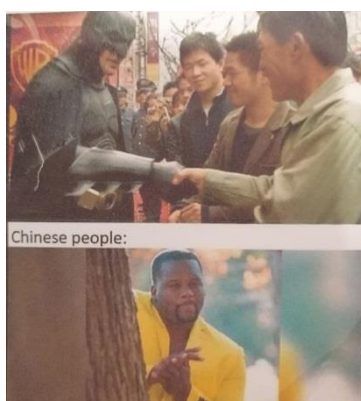
In this category, the picture dominates the words, i.e. without the words the picture alone gives the whole idea



In meme (6), the picture gives the whole idea of the Chinese eating and being the cause of the virus. While the writing is an indirect expressive reference to racialize the Chinese as being the cause of the pandemic because they eat everything.



In meme (7), the picture of the famous Chinese woman who had bat soup and the coffin dancing men gives the whole idea that eating bats leads you to the coffin or in other words China is the reason of corona virus which will lead you to death. The written text is a warning more than anything racial.



In meme (9), we have a very expressive picture of the Chinese president spreading corona virus all over the world. This picture does not need any words, the message is totally clear from the picture itself.

Thus, all three memes show direct racism by presenting a Chinese person in the memes.

Also, in meme (10), the two pictures say it all in a very comic way. Batman is greeting the Chinese people while others think about cooking him.

3. Additive

In this category, the words elaborate on the picture and visa-versa.



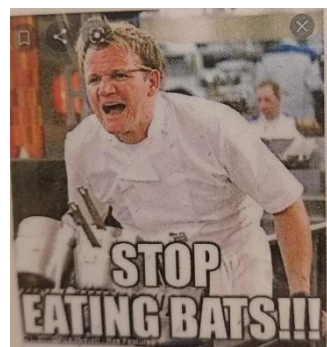
In meme (11), the picture is a box of corona ‘a well-known beer’ which contains Chinese food from a restaurant. It simply gives a message that Chinese food is the cause of corona. Also, there is an indirect expressive reference to racism in a form of a dark joke.

4. Montage

It is where words are treated as an integral part of the given picture.



In memes 12 and 13, the main idea is that when a Chinese kid or dude coughs people either run for their lives or look at who is coughing simply because it is an indication that person “who is Chinese” as written has corona virus. Here there is an indirect expressive to racism.



In memes 14 and 15 there is a direct reference to “bats” as being the major cause of the pandemic. However, both are indirect and an expressive reference to racism.

In these memes, a sudden shock is on their faces because they either are close to the Chinese border or got a free trip to China. This is a direct indication that China is the cause of the pandemic also it has expresses indirect racism towards China.



In these memes, there is a direct reference to ‘kung’ which is a word Trump used which is ‘kung-flu’ instead of corona virus. The second is a reference that Asian girls have become cheap because of the virus since no one wants them in prostitution. Thus, both memes have a direct expressive form of racism one with the word ‘kung’ and the second with the picture of an Asian women in specific a Chinese prostitute.

5. Interdependent

It is where pictures and words convey together an idea which neither would be understood alone.



In memes 20 and 21, Trump who was the only president during covid 19 called the pandemic the (Chinese Virus). Thus, by referring to the virus as Chines was a direct expressive to racism. Of course, word and picture go hand in hand.



In meme 22, we notice two things: firstly, is the direct use of Chinese people who were the cause of the pandemic and secondly, referring bats to women which is considered a sexist meme, i.e. belittling women but what is funny the woman is not Chinese but it conveys a message that women are like bats, i.e. dangerous so get away from them.



In meme 23, a famous American actor who was known for his racial comments in the series makes an excuse from Trump by saying “at least he didn’t call it the Chink flu” which is a racial word used for Asians. Thus, this meme is direct racial expressive one.



In meme 24, the picture of a Chinese kid whose making a funny facial expression and the text which comments on the kid by saying that he is Chinese and plays jokes and puts corona virus in your coke. This racial joke is known in schools to tease Chinese children but instead of using ‘peepee’ which means urine, the memers simply changed it to corona virus to go with the racial wave against the Chinese. Thus, this meme is a direct racial one.



Being a famous hit show, friends are associated with plenty of memes and what’s funny is that each character with the written text just fits fantastically. Let’s take Rachel and Monica who use the normal words (corona virus) and a different way to say it (covid 19) while Ross whose more scientific says it’s (sars) . As for Chandler who sometimes shows his dark humor in the series made fun and called it “kungflu”. While Joey, the series joke thought it was a beer which is unfortunately known as corona and finally Phebee talked about something else. Thus , in this clever meme all names of the pandemic was referred to and only Chandler’s comment was a direct racist one.



In meme 26, a very clever meme indeed because when the guy in the black cap said (Wuhan virus) the other guy considered that racist even though the guy kept on telling him about other flues or diseases which carries the name of the cities it outbreaked from like the Spanish flu which outbreaked in Spain and the German measles which outbreaked in Germany. The angry guy kept and insisting that it is racist to call a virus “Wuhan” where it actually outbreaked there. This meme is one of the few memes in that period which actually had the direct reference to racist.



Meme 27 is one of the famous memes used anywhere and in any occasion. The batman slap to Robin is a direct way to say that China is the cause of the whole holocaust. But it is not a racial one!

B- Arabic memes during Covid 19:

Throughout checking the memes that appeared in Arabic sites, there is a direct reference to China as being the cause of the pandemic but the only racist aspect of Arab memes is blaming China. No racial words were noticed. Below are the subdivisions of the most common Arab memes in the outbreak with explanation.

1. Picture specific

The picture dominates and words do not add.



In meme 27, the picture explains everything which is an Egyptian comedian youtuber, Fadi Azalat who is eating something but they put a Chinese hat preassuming he is Chinese and eating bats saying that it tastes good in Egyptian. Thus, this meme is a direct racial meme.

2. Duo specific

The words and pictures send the same message



In meme 28, the words say that “Aren’t you the one who asked God to die when you get frustrated?” says corona while the young guy says “No not me!” This means the text is about fatal death because of corona and the picture is Azraeel who takes soul, i.e. both corona and Azraeel are death.

This meme is indirect and does not have any connotations that is racial.

3. Montage

The words are treated as an integral part of the given picture



In memes (30) and (31), blame China for the virus, in (30) a well-known Egyptian actress gives a sour face saying “Good morning to the whole world except China” while (31) is a picture of a sick cat because it has got sick saying “May Allah punish you, China”. Here words play an important part of the picture and both are a direct reference to China with some racism.



In meme 32, Adel Imam a famous Egyptian comedian actor who is used in a lot of memes says “Our father Adam ate the apple and was lowered to earth and now son of ***** who ate a bat is going to take us out earth.” Thus, there is an indirect reference to China as being the cause of the pandemic.



In these last memes, they all refer to what Chinese people eat or what they should have eaten. In (33), Adel Emam saying sadly “couldn’t you put a squeeze of lemon on your bat soup son of a shoe!” Which means, if you have eaten it you might as well put some lemon so nobody could get sick. In (34), is a dark joke or satire that “you should wash your food before eating it” and the joke is that cats are one of the Chinese dishes so he/she is washing it. In meme (35), a famous Egyptian chef is representing China and he says “Now we are going to prepare a good hantie kantie virus for all our beloveds around the world”. Here the Egyptian phrase (hantie kanite) means any dangerous virus. In meme (36), we have a meme written in Iraqi dialect a man supposing to represent the world hitting another man who is supposed to be China telling him in Iraqi “why didn’t you eat rice and soup like the rest of the world”. In meme (37), we have a famous Egyptian actress who looks in dispear like all her movies asking “Does anyone know what the Chinese are going to have for lunch tomorrow”

indicating that what ever they eat causes viruses. Thus, all memes have a direct reference to China, i.e. also racist mixed with humor.

13. Conclusion Remarks

In this study, a corpus of English and Arabic memes which appeared in the outbreak of Covid 19 “image macro family” has been analyzed through speech acts and precisely expressives direct and indirect taking in consideration the racial humors implication noticed in the text-picture combination. Moreover, both English and Arabic memes are also subdivided into categories: word specific, picture specific, duo specific, additives, parallel, montage, and interdependent. The English memes, show that when combing text and image direct racial memes are obvious because there is not only the presentation of a Chinese male or female (which is alone clearly racial) but the text that also mentions China or Chinese and sometimes with racist word such as Kung, Chung, Chink. The English memes fit into five categories: word specific, picture specific, additives, montage and interdependent. As for humor, English memes are reflected through dark humor especially when presenting Chinese women who are either prostitutes or resembling Chinese food which are both dangerous because they carry the virus. As for the Arabic memes, indirect racial memes are noticed because no Chinese person is presented, no racial words and also no degrading of Chinese women. The Arabic memes are humorous and no dark implicit message is conveyed and fits into three categories: picture specific, duo specific and montage.

The implicit messages in English memes are more racial and sometimes hostile towards the Chinese unlike the Arabic memes which shows disappointment towards the Chinese but not in a racial way. Finally, we can support the fact that memes during Covid 19 are either racial direct/indirect expressives depending not only on the written text but also on the picture presented.

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