

A Sociopragmatics Study on Social Criticism in Meme Comics

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"Kajian Pragmatik dalam berbagai Bidang"



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Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta

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A SOICOPRAGMATICS STUDY ON SOCIAL CRITICISM IN MEME COMICS

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Abstract

The rapid development of information technology makes the publication in internet media more accessible and faster. Meme comics are the example of famous internet publication. Its features and content which are full of social criticism distinguish meme comics from any other comics. The research is aimed to describe the pragmatic features of meme comics. Furthermore, the various topics of social criticism expressed in meme comics are analyzed based on sociopragmatics approach. Pragmatic equivalent method is applied to identify the pragmatic features of meme comics. Moreover, the similar method is also applied in analyzing the various topics of social criticism in meme comics. Based on its form of utterance, meme comics tend to use harsh utterances to deliver social criticism. Consequently, swear words and taboos are often found. Furthermore, the use of specific terms which frequently contain adult content makes this comic only appropriate for adult readers. Then, the context and setting of meme comics describe such a topic with simple pictures and words. The research also discusses various topics of social criticism found in meme comics. The topics include sex, gender, law, technology, and lifestyle. Basically, the topics of social criticism in meme comics reveal things which happen in daily life. Eventually, the social criticism may function as a satire for people to do introspection from the mistakes in life. Consequently, the social criticism could be a trigger for mental revolution among the society to live a better life.

Key words: *meme comics, sociopragmatics, internet media, information technology*

Background of Study

If we talk about language, it means that we talk about how to materialize our thought in the form of utterance or written stuff. In fact, language is a part of our everyday experience that we always use for various kinds of purposes. Thus, language is an expression of our thoughts and ideas.

Due to its function as a means of communication, language is used for various kinds of purposes. Quirk and Stein (1990: p. 210) explained that even where the content remains constant (a particular specialist field), a shift in a purpose (from addressing fellow specialists to addressing non-specialists) triggers a shift in style and tone. Hence, this fact produces various types of language use.

The rapid development of information technology provides many opportunities to create various kinds of creative art and literary works by using various types of language. The facilities of vast broadcasting publication interest people to create various kinds of art work. One of them is a comic with unique illustration which is usually called meme comics. Apparently, meme comics are often used as a medium to deliver criticism upon social phenomena in such an interesting way. Moreover, meme comic is also created for humor purposes. The topics of meme comics are mostly related to social

phenomena in daily life. As a matter of fact, meme comics contain such a kind of satire which is delivered in humorous way. This feature distinguishes meme comics from any other kinds of comics. To get the clear understanding about meme comics, one of the examples of meme comic is provided as follows:



We could see from the example that the comic wants to deliver a message that a brilliant idea which is not materialized is useless. Humor which is delivered in meme comics is usually sarcastic and harsh as we could see in the example. Thus, slang and swearwords are frequently found in the comics.

Since meme comics are published via internet, this kind of comic is easily spread and translated into many languages to accommodate readers from all over the world. Apparently, meme comics are so popular among the *netizen*, the call for internet addict, so that the research about meme comics in the perspective of linguistics might be a breakthrough to describe a current language phenomenon in society. Thus, the research would enrich our knowledge concerning language in the real use.

Purpose

The research discusses meme comics based on pragmatics point of view. The topic to discuss is related to the use of language in meme comics. Hence, the the research is aimed to describe the pragmatic features of meme comics. Next, the topics of the social criticisms delivered by meme comics are also analyzed based on sociopragmatics approach.

Review of Related Theories

Pragmatics

Meaning in language could be analyzed in various ways depending on the purposes of the interpretation of the meaning itself. In pragmatics area, we interpret meaning based on the external aspects of language such as, context, setting, and speaker. Pragmatic meaning could produce a specific interpretation of meaning due to the intention and purposes in uttering such an utterance. In such a conversation, for instance, speakers might have certain intention to communicate each other. If the

message could be delivered in the same framework of both speaker and receiver, communication will run well. In other words, there is mutual understanding between speaker and receiver.

There are many factors that could be taken into consideration in interpreting such a meaning pragmatically. Concerning this matter, Fox emphasized that pragmatics is the study of other things that might influence meaning besides the semantic system (2010: p.1). Basically, if we talk about pragmatics, it means that we talk about meaning in the real use as stated by Levinson (1983: p.5) who defined pragmatics as the study of language usage. Moreover, Bergmann *et al* emphasized the importance of context to determine pragmatic meaning. In this case, pragmaticists study both how context helps to determine whether a particular utterance is appropriate or inappropriate as well as how changes to context alter sentences' meaning (2007: 68). Hence, a similar utterance might have different interpretation based on the context in which it occurs.

As pragmatics is closely related with the external aspects of linguistics, it also deals with social phenomena. Thus, the term sociopragmatics is used to refer to a part of pragmatic study which gives greater emphasis on social matters. To be more detail, sociopragmatics was described by Leech (1983: p. 10) as 'the sociological interface of pragmatics', referring to the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action. In other words, pragmatics is the study of communicative action in certain sociocultural context. Related to this, Meme Comic is one of the social phenomena which could be analyzed under the sociopragmatic approach. The result may reveal the pragmatic features of the comic itself and the social purpose of creating such a unique comic.

Humor

Comic is frequently created to deliver humor. Conversations and pictures in which a comic are very effective to build some kinds of joke. Even a very serious matter could turn into joke when it is delivered by using comic. Various kinds of humor in a comic are definitely created to burst laughter among readers. Monro (1988: p. 349) defined humor as a term which may be used in both a wide and a narrow sense. In the wider sense, it is applied to all literature and to all informal speech or writing in which the object is to amuse, or rouse laughter in the reader or hearer. In its narrower sense, humor is distinguished from wit, satire, and farce. It is less intellectual and more imaginative than wit, being concerned more with character and situation than with plays upon words or upon ideas; more sympathetic and less cruel than satire; more subtle than farce. Due to its characteristics, humor might be used for various purposes.

Meme comic is one kind of comics which loads many jokes. However, the jokes in meme comics are more about social criticisms which are delivered in an amusing way. No matter how harsh the social criticism is, meme comics make the criticism less rude and even entertaining. The example of humor contained in meme comic is as follows:



The humor in the meme comic is seen in the utterance *Look, mom! No teeth...* Pragmatically, the comic tries to deliver a message that we should not show off for the ridiculous thing if we do not expect a bad thing to happen from it. Moreover, the comic also delivers such a social criticism for people who like to show off. The social criticism which is delivered by using meme comics seems far from rude. Readers tend to consider it as an entertaining humor than social criticism. As a result, humor becomes one of the important aspects in meme comics.

Implicature

Such an utterance may contain an implied meaning which mainly depends on the context where it occurs. Moreover, the interlocutors who are involved in a string of conversation also play a great role to determine what so called as implicature. In other words, such a similar message could be delivered by using various ways of communication. This phenomenon is the object of the research in implicature.

The study of implicature contributes various interpretations of meaning in pragmatics. Basically, implicature might be used as the art of communication as stated by Sperber and Wilson in Moeschler (2011: 2) who defined implicature as a way in which relevance and successful communication can be achieved. In order to make the communication more interesting, speakers create such witty utterances to deliver certain message. Therefore, Haugh (2002: 2) explained that implicature is characterized simply as whatever is communicated that is not part of what is said by speaker. Furthermore, Levinson (1983: 97) stated that implicature provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean (in some general sense) more than what is actually 'said' (i.e. more than what is literally expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered). In this case, the interpretation of possible meaning that could be drawn from such an utterance is the more important thing to analyze than the utterance itself.

The example of implicature which is contained in Meme Comics is as follows:



The implied meaning in the comic is that the girl rejects the invitation of the boy to do sexual intercourse with him. From the example we could see that the boy tries to flirt with the girl by opening the conversation with *Hey, wanna hear a story about my penis?*. Then, the boy continues to show off by describing the size of his genital organ in order to look masculine and strong by saying *Nevermind. It's too long.* Finally, the seduction is rejected when the girl says *Nevermind. You'll never get it.* It is obvious that the speakers utter something which actually means something else so that the conversation contains implicature.

One of the types of implicature is conversational implicature which is mainly implicature produced by such a conversation. Cruse (2000: 349) proposed the idea that propositions or assumptions are not always encoded completely or incompletely in what is actually said. Furthermore, he described the following criteria to identify conversational implicature:

1. Context dependence. It deals with the phenomena that an expression with a single meaning can give rise to different conversational implicature in different contexts.
2. Defeasibility/cancellability. In fact, conversational implicature can be cancelled by additional material without contradiction or anomaly.
3. Non-detachability. In this case, the same propositional content in the same context will always give rise to the same conversational implicature, in whatever form it is expressed (that is to say, the implicature is tied to meaning, and not to form).
4. Calculability. Basically, a conversational implicature must be calculable, using statable general principles, on the basis of conventional meaning together with contextual information.

The theories of conversational implicature would be applied to describe the form of Meme Comics and the meaning of social criticism contained in the comics. Some other findings related to this matter are also possible due to various aspects such as speakers, settings, topics, and norms.

Research Method

As meme comics are commonly broadcast in social media, the data for the research are taken from specific websites which publish meme comics via internet. The following websites are chosen as the source of data as they publish various types of meme comics via internet media:

www.MemeBlender.com

www.lol_comics.livejournal.com

www.memecomicalcentral.wordpress.com

www.memejelly.com

Many types of meme comics are provided in those websites. Moreover, the websites are visited by many *netizens* or internet addicts from all over the world. They act as the contributors who update the stuffs regularly. Apparently, meme comics are published in various languages to accommodate the readers from various countries. However, meme comics which use English are mostly found as English is still considered as an international language. All the websites which are taken as the source of data in this research provide meme comics in English. Therefore, they could be the valid data of the research.

Furthermore, the data should be analysed using appropriate technique in order to produce valuable result. First, the pragmatics features of meme comics are analyzed based on the form and the context. Pragmatic equivalent method is applied to describe the features as it involves the external elements of linguistics. The method is proposed by Djajasudarma who stated that equivalent method is a method to analyse data based on the extra linguistic factors (1991: 60). The application of the method is as follows:



The Meme Comic belongs to the monologue type as the speaker just tells the story of himself without any conversation. The verbal strategy to deliver a message pragmatically is emphasized by the cartoon. It produces the comic which contains social criticism.

Next, the topics of social criticism are described based on the context and setting. In this case, pragmatic equivalent method is the most appropriate method to apply in analyzing the problem. The example of analysis is provided as follows:



The meme comic contains the social criticism which is related to sex. Based on the context, the conversation shows that the guy wants to ask the woman to have sex with him but he is rejected. It shows that nowadays, sexual activity is considered as a common thing. Men are free to ask any girl to have sex with them. Therefore, girls and women bear more risk to be the object of sexual abuse. The Meme Comic tries to warn women that they have to dare to reject and protect themselves from sexual abuse.

Findings

As the new kind of comic genre, meme comic has its own pragmatics features which distinguish it from other kinds of comics. The features are determined based on the form of utterance, context, and setting.

Moreover, there are also various kinds of social problems in daily life which are expressed in meme Comics in the form of social criticism. As it is uttered in the form of comics, the social criticism looks funnier, wittier, and more interesting for the reader. It is such kind of modern art which has a purpose of entertaining people and giving advice to people at the same time. The topics which are taken in meme comics to express social criticism include sex, gender, love, law, technology, education, and lifestyle.

Discussion

The discussion is based on the problems of the research which are divided into two kinds of analysis. The first discussion is about the pragmatics features of meme comics. The next focus of discussion is the topics of social criticisms in meme comics.

Pragmatics Features of Meme Comics

Meme comics have specific pragmatics features which are seen from the form of utterance and the context and setting. Each feature is discussed in the following parts.

Form of Utterance

The utterances which are used in meme comics tend to be harsh. Therefore, the comics often use some swear words to show anger, annoyance, and disappointment. The example of language use in meme comics is provided in the following example:

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The swear words such as *fuck*, *shit*, and *GTFO* (*Get The Fuck Off*) are frequently used in meme comics. The rude words are used to express anger and annoyance.

Furthermore, the comics use simple conversation which is straight to the point. Mostly meme comics use simple words and common term to describe the idea. However, the setting which shows the unique pictures describes the situation very well so that the pictures support the meaning of the utterances as a whole. It could be seen from the following comic:



The last picture of the comic complete the idea that the character which is described by the term '*me*' burned his hands after he washed his cold hands with the hot water. Moreover, it implies the fact that people sometimes do the silly things in their life because they want everything is done instantly and quickly.

The specific terms are also found in meme comics to describe certain expression as it is shown in the following comic:



The term *Poker Face* is created to show the flat and nervous expression when someone is caught in the act of doing something wrong. In this case, the boy feels awkward as his girlfriend finds out his affair with another girl by chance.

Based on the forms of the utterance, it is obvious that meme comics are intended more for adult readers. The use of swear words and some specific terms which are usually harsh in the comics are not really appropriate for children. Moreover, the idea which is described by the utterance and the setting mostly contain adult content. It is not easy for children to understand the topic as the comic contains social criticism.

Context and Setting

Meme comics are made by using specific pictures and utterances to describe certain topics. Specifically, there is the main picture which shows the main character of Meme Comics called **le me*. Some other pictures sometimes occur to describe other characters in the comics such as **le mom* and **le dad*. The pictures in meme comics are mostly simple pictures that could build certain context. All pictures and utterances create certain context that leads the reader to understand the content of the comics. The example is as follows:



The context of meme comics entitled "Commercial" describes the awkward situation when the family watches the commercial break on TV which contains sexual content together. The setting is in the family room where the kid sits between the parents when the sexual commercial came on. The pictures and the utterances obviously

describe how uncomfortable the kid to watch such a kind of commercial together with the parents.

Most of the context of meme comics describes various kinds of problems in daily life. The character **le me* or **me* is the main character who shows the social problem and is mostly described as a victim of certain situation.

Topics of Social Criticisms in Meme Comics

Various kinds of social problems in daily life are described in meme comics in the form of social criticism. As it is expressed in the form of comics, the social criticism looks funnier, wittier, and more interesting for the reader. It is such a kind of modern art which has a purpose of entertaining people and giving advice to people at one time. The topics of social criticism in meme comics include sex, gender, law, technology, education, love, and lifestyle.

The analysis of each topic of social criticism in meme comics is presented in the following parts. Some examples are included to make the explanation clearer.

Sex in Meme Comics

Sex is always interesting to discuss. Some meme comics contain satire in relation to sex. It could be seen in the following comic:



The topic of sex is raised when the character **me* offers his girlfriend to try his new bed as he just moved to a new apartment. Actually, it is an invitation to have sex but the ending of the comic is quite shocking as both just jump up on the bed and do not do anything related to sex. However, the comic still tries to deliver social criticism about free sex. In other words, people do not need to get married first to have sex.

Gender in Meme Comics

The topic related to gender is one of the interesting topics for social criticism. The authority of man power towards woman is often criticized as it is seen in the example of meme comic as follows:



In this comic, woman is described to be responsible for cooking. Consequently, woman tends to make man happy by serving delicious food. When, the food is not nice, woman is the one to blame and man could abuse woman because of that matter.

Legal Offenses in Meme Comics

The serious topic like law could also be taken as the topic for social criticism in meme comics. However, it is described in a fun way as we could see in the following example:



Nowadays, the internet connection could be accessed everywhere. Therefore, people could download many kinds of stuffs easily despite it is legally or illegally done. In some countries with a strict rule of piracy, illegal download could be a law suit that could put someone in jail.

Technology in Meme Comics

The rapid growth of technology creates various kinds of gadgets. Apparently, nowadays, people depend on gadgets too much. In other words, gadget is a part of people's life which is very important to conduct a modern life. The social criticism related to technology is shown in the following meme comic:



Despite of its benefit, the comic shows us that gadget may be harmful. It implies the message that we are just a human being who has to be wise in using the technology.

Education in Meme Comics

Social criticism in education is often a kind of description of the quality of education and the relation between teacher and students. The example is as follows:



The comic obviously expresses that students do not have much respect anymore to their teacher. Eventually, it perpetuates the less quality of the education itself.

Lifestyle in Meme Comics

Lifestyle might be related to various kinds of activities in daily life. One of the examples is a bad habit in the morning like we can see in the following meme comic:



Waking up in the morning is often so hard for many people. Although the alarm had already set to wake up on time, many people are still lazy to wake up in the morning. Eventually, they regret if they wake up late although the alarm had already been set.

Conclusion

Meme comics as one of the popular internet publication have distinctive features that makes the comics different from any other kinds of comics. The using of harsh words and swear words are often found in meme comics. Moreover, the comics also contain adult contents. Consequently, meme comics are only appropriate for adult readers. The simple context and setting of meme comics support the message in the comics to be delivered clearly.

Furthermore, meme comics are created to express social criticism. The topics of social criticism in meme comics include sex, gender, legal offenses, technology and

science, education, and lifestyle. All the topics are related to things happen in daily life. Apparently, meme comics contain satire of bad things in daily life that need to be fixed. In other words, meme comic is a mirror that reminds us to create a better life.

The further research on meme comics with sociolinguistics approach is recommended to portray the persuasive effect of meme comics in society. Therefore, the research on meme comics may give a valuable contribution to the study of linguistics especially pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

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