The Semiotic Transgression of the Meme in Human Interaction: A Sociolinguistic and Multimodal Analysis of Postdigital Speech

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000287

Received: 14 October 2026; Accepted: 19 October 2026; Published: 02 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Research problem: The permeability of digital expressions in everyday verbal interaction.

General objective: To analyze the influence of memes on students' oral and digital communication. **Classification and design:** Sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach in two phases (primary quantitative and qualitative). By data collection source, it was cross-sectional observational.

Population and sample: 1,371 enrolled students; stratified probabilistic quantitative sample of 301 participants and qualitative sample of 16 participants across four focus groups.

Research instruments: Structured closed digital questionnaire (45 items) and semi-structured group discussion guide.

Instrument validation: Expert judgment and prior pilot test ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Data analysis: Descriptive statistics in SPSS v.26 and thematic content analysis.

Results: 100% of respondents incorporate memetic expressions when speaking face-to-face, and 29% regularly substitute complex explanations with memes.

Conclusions: The collected evidence validates the working hypothesis: the meme acts as a mechanism of cognitive synthesis and communicative support in oral conversation, highlighting the conceptualization of the "mecto" phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

Computer-Mediated Communication has evolved into an environment characterized by hypermediation in daily interactions. The continuous adoption of digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok has transformed the syntactic and pragmatic structures through which people exchange information in their daily lives (Yus, 2018; Herring, 2019). In this scenario, the mass adoption of internet memes and macro images constitutes a key object of sociolinguistic analysis in contemporary communication.

Far from being merely ephemeral entertainment content, memes represent multimodal cultural artifacts that synthesize shared ideas, emotions, and frames of reference among speakers (Shifman, 2014; Djumabayeva, 2025). In university communities, students employ memes not only on digital screens, but as an everyday lexical repertoire integrated into their face-to-face oral conversations (Aladro Vico & Jardón Clemente, 2022; Mukhtar et al., 2024).

Traditional formal linguistics tended to interpret these visual and textual resources as deviations from standard language or indicators of lexical poverty. However, contemporary approaches demonstrate that the boundaries

between online and face-to-face interaction have become blurred (Herring, 2019; Ruiz Martínez, 2018). Memes act as a semiotic bridge that allows speakers to negotiate social positioning, express emotions, and strengthen group identities in the postdigital environment (Benassini-Félix, 2020; Huang et al., 2024).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research articulates cultural memetics, digital pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and symbolic interactionism. Dawkins (1976) defined the meme as the minimum unit of cultural transmission subject to fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. When transferring the concept to cyberculture, Shifman (2014) and Djumabayeva (2025) point out that digital memes are not identical copies, but hybrid texts that require remixing, recontextualization, and active appropriation by users.

From the pragmatics of digital communication, Herring (2019) and Yus (2018) explain that messaging applications foster a conversational syntax where writing adopts the immediacy of speech. Graphic and iconic resources fulfill essential paralinguistic functions to restore affective modulation, ironic tone, and message contextualization (Tassadiq et al., 2025). This dynamic configures generational sociolects that regulate community belonging (Aladro Vico & Jardón Clemente, 2022).

For its part, symbolic interactionism maintains that human interaction is organized around shared meanings attributed to symbols. In the university community, the meme acts as a sociolinguistic code that strengthens internal cohesion (Gutiérrez & Cuevas, 2024). The mastery and timely citation of memetic references provides communicative capital and social recognition among peers, directly influencing daily sociability processes (Pérez Salazar, 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2024).

1.3 Objectives and Hypothesis

General Objective: To analyze how the appropriation of memes and macro images on social networks affects face-to-face verbal communication structures, sense of humor, and cognitive synthesis processes in university students.

Specific Objectives:

- To determine the frequency with which students transfer memetic expressions from digital platforms into face-to-face oral interaction.
- To identify qualitative discursive substitution mechanisms in which memes replace complex verbal explanations.
- To describe the linguistic abstraction process termed "mecto."
- To evaluate the function of memes as a communicative facilitator in individuals with shyness or verbal expression difficulties.

Hypothesis: Continuous exposure to memetic content on social networks generates a systematic transfer of multimodal resources to face-to-face speech, functioning as a discursive synthesis mechanism and social interaction facilitator in the university community (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

METHOD

2.1 Research Classification and Design

The research was based on a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design (DEXPLIS; Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). The study integrated a primary normative quantitative phase and an in-depth qualitative second phase aimed at explaining the motivations and discursive dynamics observed in the sample. By scope of objectives, the study was explanatory. Regarding the data collection source, it was classified as observational, given that communicative phenomena were recorded in their natural environment without experimental manipulation.

Unlike prior formulations, the research was methodologically defined as a cross-sectional (non-longitudinal)

design, since quantitative and qualitative data collection was executed punctually and concentrated within a single academic period (February to May 2026), without applying repeated measurements over time to the same cohort.

2.2 Data Collection Schedule

To provide greater methodological clarity, Table 1 details the timeline and work plan executed during the study.

Table 1. Detailed schedule of data collection and study activities.

Phase / Period	Executed Activities	Inputs / Products
Phase 1: Preparation (December 2025)	Design of questionnaires and discussion guides; validation through expert judgment of 5 faculty members; pilot test with n = 30 students.	Adjusted and validated instruments (α = 0.88).
Phase 2: Quantitative Collection (March 2026)	Administration of the structured digital questionnaire to the stratified sample (n = 301).	Cleaned and refined database in SPSS v.26.
Phase 3: Qualitative Collection (April 2026)	Recruitment and execution of 4 focus group sessions (n = 16 key informants). Audio recorded and transcribed.	Categorized verbatim transcriptions.
Phase 4: Analysis & Integration (May 2026)	Descriptive statistical analysis in SPSS and thematic content analysis; triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data.	Results report and corpus integration.

Source: Own elaboration.

2.3 Population, Sampling Procedure, and Participants

The target population consisted of N = 1,371 students enrolled in four degree programs at the Autonomous University of Nayarit: Philosophy, Psychology, Applied Linguistics, and Communication and Media. A stratified probabilistic sampling strategy by degree program was employed for the quantitative phase, ensuring representativeness at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). An overall response rate of 94.2% was obtained from invitations sent via institutional email and virtual classrooms.

For the qualitative phase, purposive or convenience sampling was applied to select n = 16 participants with high communicative interaction levels, distributed equally across four focus groups (4 members per group, representing each degree program).

Table 2 presents the full distribution of the sample according to participants' demographic and academic characteristics.

Table 2. Distribution of the sample by degree program and socio-demographic characteristics (n = 301).

Degree Program	Total Population (N)	Quantitative Sample (n)	Percentage (%)	Qualitative Sample (FG)	Average Age (± SD)
Communication and Media	480	105	34.9%	4 participants	21.2 ± 1.8
Psychology	450	99	32.9%	4 participants	20.8 ± 1.5
Applied Linguistics	261	57	18.9%	4 participants	21.5 ± 2.1
Philosophy	180	40	13.3%	4 participants	22.1 ± 2.3
Total / Average	**1,371**	**301**	**100.0%**	**16 participants**	**21.4 ± 1.9**

Source: Own elaboration based on institutional academic records. Note: Gender distribution across the total sample was 54.2% female, 43.5% male, and 2.3% non-binary.

2.4 Research Instruments and Operationalization of Variables

Two main variables were analyzed in the study: a) Meme consumption and digital interaction; and b) Discursive

transfer and semiotic substitution. Table 3 shows the detailed operationalization of both variables.

Table 3. Operationalization of study variables.

Variable	Subvariables / Categories	Indicators	Instrument / Scale
Meme consumption and digital interaction	• Exposure frequency • Preferred platforms • Content types	• Daily hours on social media (>3h, 1-3h, <1h) • Active platforms (FB, WA, IG, TikTok) • Active interaction level (sharing, commenting)	Structured digital questionnaire (5-point Likert Scale).
Discursive transfer and semiotic substitution	• Face-to-face meme usage • Explanation substitution • Syntactic abstraction ("mecto") • Social facilitation	• Face-to-face verbal frequency • Verbal argument replacement rate • Degree of iconic/gestural simplification • Perceived reduction in shyness/anxiety	Digital questionnaire and semi-structured discussion guide for focus groups.

Source: Own elaboration.

Instrument validation: The quantitative questionnaire (45 items) underwent expert judgment by five PhD professors in linguistics and communication. Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted with 30 participants outside the final sample, obtaining a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.88$, confirming high internal consistency. The focus group guide was validated through qualitative review for clarity and thematic relevance.

2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data processed in SPSS v.26 included frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency. For qualitative data from focus groups, verbatim transcription and thematic content analysis assisted by inductive-deductive categorization were performed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Descriptive findings from the questionnaire indicate high daily exposure to social media: 56% of participants spend over 3 hours daily on these platforms, 32% spend 1 to 3 hours, and 12% spend less than 1 hour. Regarding the incorporation of digital language into face-to-face conversation, 100% of the sample (n = 301) confirmed using memetic expressions in their daily speech.

Regarding the discursive substitution function, 29% of respondents reported habitually replacing elaborate verbal explanations with memetic references, 58% do so occasionally, and 13% state that they never resort to this mechanism (Table 4). When examining behavior by academic field, Communication and Media students (38.1%) and Psychology students (31.3%) showed the highest tendency to habitually substitute explanations with memes. In contrast, in Applied Linguistics (21.1%) and Philosophy (15.0%), this resource appears more occasionally, often accompanied by a reflective distance regarding their own lexical choice.

Table 4. Percentage distribution of digital habits and communicative transfer of memes (n = 301).

Analyzed Variable	Percentage Distribution (%)	Result Description
Daily time on social networks	> 3 hours: 56.0% 1 - 3 hours: 32.0% < 1 hour: 12.0%	Frequent and continuous use of digital platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok).
Meme usage when speaking (face-to-face)	100.0% of the sample	Direct incorporation of internet phrases, tones, and modulations into daily speech.
Substitution of verbal explanations	Frequent: 29.0% Occasional: 58.0% Never: 13.0%	Use of memetic references to shorten, summarize, or replace complex discourses.
Situational relation of memes	Frequent: 84.0% Sometimes: 16.0%	Spontaneous activation of memetic analogies when facing daily life experiences.

Source: Own elaboration.

In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis of focus groups allowed exploring the daily experiences behind these figures. Four key dynamics were identified, illustrated by the participants' own statements:

1. Communicative facilitation: Those who experience shyness or hesitation when speaking often rely on memetic phrases as a safe crutch that reduces the pressure of spontaneous speech. A student described it as follows:

"When I don't know how to react in a somewhat awkward situation, I blurt out the phrase exactly as I heard it in the video or meme. It's like a shortcut: the other person laughs, catches the tone, and I don't have to give any further explanations" (Informant 3, FG2 - Psychology).

2. Humor modulation and catharsis: Shared irony operates as a safety valve against the strain of academic routines, allowing individuals to express intense emotional states through brief references. A participant explained:

"During final submission weeks, we don't even break down why we feel overwhelmed. We drop any quick catchphrase or reference and the group instantly gets our level of stress, without needing to verbalize it dramatically" (Informant 1, FG1 - Communication and Media).

3. Contextual gradation: The use of these resources is not indiscriminate; there is an intuitive management of register depending on setting and interlocutors. An informant commented:

"In the hallway with friends you talk using almost pure internet code, but once you step into the classroom or in an oral exam, you switch gears. At most, if the professor is cool, you throw in a light ironic modulation to ease your participation, but you know exactly where you can and where you can't" (Informant 4, FG3 - Applied Linguistics).

4. The "mecto" process: Describes how a complex narrative or extended trend compresses gradually until condensing into a word out of context, a specific tone, or a minimal gesture that only those sharing the code can decipher. A student illustrated it as follows:

"We see 'mecto' as a kind of synthesis. A video or trend that has been circulating for weeks suddenly condenses into a gesture or a single word spoken out of place. Whoever knows the reference gets the whole backstory at once; whoever doesn't, is simply left out of the loop" (Informant 2, FG4 - Philosophy).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The finding that 100% of the sample transfers memetic elements into oral interaction confirms the blurred boundary between digital and face-to-face spaces highlighted by Herring (2019) and Yus (2018). Rather than demonstrating vocabulary impoverishment, the data support the emergence of an expressive economy where the meme operates as a modern pictogram geared toward simplicity and humor (Djumabayeva, 2025).

Syntactic abstraction ("mecto") aligns with Aladro Vico and Jardón Clemente's (2022) proposal regarding memes as generational sociolects. From a linguistic perspective, this process relies on a pragmatic enthymeme that requires prior memetic literacy from the interlocutor to decode the implicit premise (Benassini-Félix, 2020; Ruiz Martínez, 2018). Meanwhile, the role of social facilitator for shyness coincides with reports by Mukhtar et al. (2024) and Huang et al. (2024), reaffirming the communicative capital provided by shared codes.

CONCLUSIONS

The analytical trajectory of this study reveals how memetic resources have ceased to be mere screen content, integrating organically into daily speech within the university setting. The collected evidence supports the stated hypothesis: frequent contact with these digital narratives fosters an appropriation of expressive patterns that students spontaneously transfer to face-to-face exchanges (100% of respondents), using them as shortcuts for discursive synthesis in nearly one-third of their regular interactions (29%).

At a conceptual level, the primary contribution of this research lies in characterizing the "mecto" phenomenon. This notion helps name the process through which an extensive visual story gradually reduces until becoming embodied in a single word, gesture, or specific inflection, economizing explanatory effort and strengthening peer camaraderie.

From a broader perspective, these findings suggest that postdigital speech forms do not stem from a simple vocabulary degradation, but from pragmatic reconfigurations that adapt to young people's demands for immediacy and affective connection. Recognizing these dynamics opens an opportunity for academic communities and educators to engage with their students' expressive repertoires, leveraging the empathetic and ironic weight of these codes to build bridges in classroom mediation.

Finally, it should be noted that as a cross-sectional study limited to a specific university environment, these results invite future research to explore how these habits vary across different age groups or in the face of automated content generated by artificial intelligence.

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