



The semiotic and pragmatic functions of humour in Kenyan instagram memes

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of social media has changed the way meaning is created and negotiated shared in digital communications. However, while humor shapes much of Kenya's online culture, research has largely ignored the actual mechanics through which words, images, and cultural context come together to build the humorous messages. Therefore, the objectives of this study was to describe the semiotic and pragmatic functions of the humour in Kenyan Instagram memes. The study adopted descriptive research design. Data was gathered by systematically extracting platform-native contextual metadata, engagement metrics, and user comments from a high-follower creator's page. Through systematic random sampling, the study identified 40 Kenyan Instagram memes posted in the period July 2025 to January 2026. However, after reaching data saturation, only 19 were analysed within the framework of Berger's (1993) Humour Theory using multimodal content analysis and thematic analysis. The results showed that humour is frequently generated through incongruity between expectation and reality. The memes are multimodal communicative constructions, where the linguistic and visual resources are used together to form meaning and communicate socially and communicatively. Humour in memes also plays an important role as a social and communicative function; it can be used to comment on sensitive topics indirectly, but with an effect, while simultaneously fostering a sense of connection between the users of memes by sharing reality and experiences. The findings revealed that unpacking the context of Kenyan digital humour required deep cultural familiarity. Without an understanding of everyday Kenyan life, outsiders would struggle to interpret the intricate multimodal layers of the memes. The study concluded that Kenyan Instagram memes are important multimodal sites of meaning making where humour, language, visual resources, pragmatic processes and cultural knowledge are part of the mix. Linguists should investigate whether code-switching between English, Kiswahili, and Sheng is the main trigger for humor, or if the disconnect comes from the clash between the text and the images.

Keywords. Humour, Instagram, Internet Meme, Pragmatic Function, Semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet memes on platforms like Instagram have evolved from mere instruments of online entertainment into sophisticated forms of multimodal communication and social commentary (Shifman, 2013; Pech, 2003; Situma & Khejeri, 2026). In the context of Kenya's vibrant digital landscape, creators leverage a unique blend of visual tropes, use of English, Kiswahili, and Sheng, and highly localized cultural codes to construct complex humorous narratives. However, due to the pervasive and multimodal nature of the internet memes, they inherently generate varied meanings and perspectives. Since memes blend text, images, and deep cultural references they can easily lead to significant communicative gaps and interpretive ambiguity (Tuten & Solomon, 2017; Statista, 2023). Despite this complexity and the frequent risk of anyone outside the creator's immediate cultural context misinterpreting the humor, contemporary scholarship often dismisses internet memes as trivial digital entertainment. Thus, a formal academic analysis combining semiotics and pragmatics is necessary to decode the complex, nuanced subtexts embedded in the memes to reveal how meanings are shaped, negotiated and deconstructed in the contemporary Kenyan digital discourse.

The present study built on this perspective to examine the participatory dynamics of meme culture. Thus, the analysis examined the semiotic and pragmatic dynamics of memes to elucidate how they are utilized to negotiate social norms, disrupt dominant narratives and offer opportunities for daily life and social issues. This provided a more holistic perspective of the interactive nature of the production of memes to create humor, the use a multimodal approach in the interpretation of humor in memes through different modes and a deeper understanding of the different cultural experiences and shared knowledge of humorous memes in digital environments.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the semiotic and pragmatic functions of humour in Kenyan Instagram memes.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 The Humour Theory

The humour theory by Berger (1993) was used as a significant theoretical framework to explore Kenyan Instagram memes humour strategies. The significant advantage of Berger's framework is that it points to particular ways in which humour is built rather than considers only laughter as a reaction from an audience (Berger, 1993; Martin, 2007). The value of Berger's work in the field of humour studies lies in the fact that his model provides a systematic and platform-oriented method for analysing humour, rather than the more classic humour theory approaches which are mostly audience processing outcomes based, such as laughter. The relief dimension of humour as articulated by Berger (1993) is the first tenet of the theory which explains how humour is produced by tension released by someone.

Humour allows the speaker to take a break from emotional situations, thereby breaking the cycle of stress and bringing balance back into the system. The second tenet is 'incongruity dimension of humour' also referred as 'discrepancy' or 'bisociation' (Berger, 1993; Omondi, 2022). It refers to the way humour is generated when two elements are combined together and are unexpected or incompatible manner. The third tenet is the superiority dimension of humour which is used when the target of superiority humour can be a person, institution group or situation becomes the object of comic evaluation. The dimension suggests that there is an element of disdain in humorous discourse, which is due to the power of the communicator.

2.2 Empirical Review

At the most basic level, a meme is a system of signs that can be used to investigate the connection between image and text and the ideas or concepts held within the culture (Simiyu, 2021). Yet, the implication generated by the authors and readers of memes is an important part of their meaning and is highly context-dependent, as well as dependent on shared and general knowledge (Cannizaro, 2021; Turhan, 2013). Therefore, memes have moved beyond their role as a purely entertainment medium, and are now being used to communicate nuanced ideas, feelings, and commentary about social issues through images, video or text (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

Humour in the digital realm is frequently based on incongruity and intertextuality and can take the form of irony, sarcasm and narrative jokes, and is often expressed by the participants through the manifestation of observable joy (Cannizaro, 2021). This implies that without a thorough semiotic and pragmatic investigation, the deep impact that digital humour has on shaping public opinion and cultural identity could be lost (Snyder, 2011). Furthermore, significant variability in the ways meaning is successfully negotiated can be explained through linguistic models because subsequent layers of meme are added and contain inside-joke orientation.

In Kenya, memes are gaining traction as an effective way of disseminating information via humor, especially on Instagram. Kenyan memes which are encoded in English, Kiswahili and code switching through Sheng', manifest varied meanings among the digital community due to diverse cultural references and the multimodal nature of the memes. In previous studies, memes were simple and, in some cases, simple words or phrases were poorly spelled or used the wrong grammar (Njoroge, 2025). However, Simiyu (2021) revealed that memes were becoming more evident in critical national events such as the 2017 elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, where their use shaped public opinion and promoted social activism. With time, memes have been evolving from just a simple macro containing text to more complex shapes; challenges, GIFs, viral sensations (Fatima et al., 2025). Although previous studies showed the importance of context inference and shared knowledge in understanding digital humour there was a gap in how the pragmatic process interacts with visual and other semiotic process in the construction and interpretation of humour in memes.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design within the qualitative research paradigm. The design allowed the systematic description and interpretation of naturally occurring data. From a pragmatic and semiotic perspective, the study examined how meaning was created through the interaction of linguistic and visual elements within specific contexts.

3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out on the online social media platform called Instagram (IG). Instagram hosts a vibrant meme culture dedicated to humorous politics, social commentary, and everyday life. The memes analysed were specifically obtained from the Kenyan Instagram page @domey-lite that was known for posting humorous content. The choice of study was based on influence the high frequency of posting memes on cultural and social issues in Kenya. This was grounded in web-based materials.



3.3 Target Population

The target population for this study comprised of a Kenyan Instagram account @Domey_lite who had 379,000 followers and has 2977 posts in English or Kiswahili on their public page posted between July 2025 and January 2026. This period was preferred because it provided a sufficient broad timeframe for examining humour strategies and their semiotic and pragmatic functions within the current Kenyan social media discourse (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

3.4 Samp-ling and Sample Size

Since the study was specifically on humorous memes, the researcher first purposively screened the 900 posts to determine whether posts fitted the inclusion criteria of memes relevant to the study objective. Hence, the accessible population from which the subsequent sample was drawn consisted of 400 memes. The sample size was constituted using systematic random sampling by selecting every tenth meme which gave a total of 40 memes. The systematic selection of each 10th meme gave a standardized method for selecting the memes and minimised the researcher's chance of making arbitrary selections (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013). However, after a further cleaning up of data only 19 memes were left as the final corpus for analysis.

3.5 Data Collection

Relevant memes were captured through screenshots or downloads, supporting both visual (semiotic) and textual elements that are maintained for further analysis. Supplementary data such as the user comments, discussions, and reactions surrounding the memes were collected to provide additional context for analysis. The researcher developed a data extraction guide which helped to document the presence of specific pragmatic features, illustrate their linguistic realisation (text, captions or visuals) and explain how they captured humour construction.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria clearly defined what constituted a meme or humour versus generic social media content. This also addressed multimodality, memetic repetition, platform timeframe, language and minimum engagement to ascertain there was circulation. Only publicly available memes were used to ensure that private posts or restricted accounts were not assessed. All collected data, including screenshots, downloads, and comments, were securely stored on password-protected devices, with access limited solely to the researcher. By following these protocols, the study upholds ethical integrity while allowing for comprehensive data collection and analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

The memes collected undertook a multi-level pragmatic analysis so as to look at the linguistic and visual strategies used to construct humour and achieve communicative goals. The memes selected for the study contained images and monologues that had the context behind making the meme and had the message intended by the meme maker. Content analysis enabled the researcher to identify special characteristics of messages. The analysis applied semiotic analysis to evaluate imagery in particular facial expressions, image choice, typography, symbols, gestures and the link between text and image in order to analyze how these signs play a significant role to humour and meaning in the memes.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available memes were used to ensure that private posts or restricted accounts were not assessed since ethical considerations were critical when using online materials. Data collected by specific users were anonymized unless creators were public figures. Prior to going to the field, the researcher first obtained ethical clearance from the institution's Ethical Review Committee (IREC) and the National Commission of Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). All collected data, including screenshots, downloads, and comments, were securely stored on password-protected devices, with access limited solely to the researcher. By following these protocols, the study upholds ethical integrity while allowing for comprehensive data collection and analysis.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

A total of 19 Kenyan Instagram memes were analysed for this study based on varied themes such as education, relationships, economic hardships, and everyday experiences. The memes underwent a semiotic and pragmatic coding process to enable the identification of their pragmatic function. As such, short, direct and humorous memes were analysed by describing the images, text and captions. The findings revealed several semiotic features including facial expressions, body posture, symbolic objects, setting and image juxtaposition. These semiotic elements portrayed frustration, joy or confusion, social criticism, identity construction and moral instruction.



4.1.1 Visual Incongruity in Academic and Career Expectations

In plate 1, the meme caption shows Agriculture students during internship. The accompanied image shows two individuals in blue overalls attempting to manage a cow with considerable difficulty with a rope. One person is dragged in the process, and the other attempts to maintain control.



Plate 1

Agriculture Students during Internship

As illustrated in Plate 1, an internship involves learning and professional development, but instead the students are pulling a rope to control the cow, but they are overwhelmed. Muya & Onyinge, (2026). semiotics explore the relationship between sign and meaning in the following way, as seen. The cow as a visual image symbolizes the practical realities and unpredictability of agricultural work; the rope as a visual image signifies the student's attempt to control the animal, while their overalls in blue help to identify that they are agriculture students and identify them as trainees engaged in fieldwork. The setting of the meme is in a farm environment. Their body positions: one dragged down the other, straining both trying to hold the rope. They communicate helplessness. The caption 'Agriculture students' helps to stabilize the meaning by identifying the people in the internship and acts as an anchorage, and together with the image, the scene becomes a comic critique (Kress and Leeuwen, 2006). Communication is multimodal. Humour arises from a semiotic perspective; there is incongruity where humour is created from what an internship involves – learning and professional development and not students being overpowered by an animal they are supposed to manage. The humour is also an expression of superiority, as the audience laughs while they watch the students in their predicament.

4.1.2 Everyday Experiences through Object Personification

The meme in figure 1 has a few animated characters weeping profusely, which makes for an amplified emotional response. The visual sign of crying animated characters symbolizes fear, despair or extreme sadness. The 'linguistic sign' is a common black skinned trouser worn by some individuals frequently. The image is paired with the text, "The Black Trousers", which is crying because washing can lead to a loss of colour and fading, indicating distress for the trousers as a human-like entity.



Figure 1: *Animated Characters*



4.1.3 Contrast in Relationship Humour

The meme in Plate 2 features a man and a woman lying together in bed while reading a holy Bible. The phrase 'My intentions when I invite you for a sleepover' sets up a humorous contrast: heavy lifting precedes the image of two adults in a bed which is symbolic of companionship and intimacy; in a cultural context, sharing a bed is indicative of a romantic relationship. The bible represents spirituality and morality; the picture represents self-control in spite of what the audience may think of the circumstances. The synthesis of text and image is strategic and generates humour. The caption sets an expectation which is widely accepted in the concept of sleepovers.



Plate 2

Relationship Humour

4.1.4 Human Responses through Supernatural Personification

Plate 3 depicts a young man's facial expression that acts as the visual sign within the image; his fleeting smile and amused facial expression symbolize silent judgement. Amusement and observation when interpreted together with the caption. His expression is easily recognizable to audiences as the reaction the Devil would have made to human reaction. The dark clothing fits the idea of the supernatural being suggested by the caption, but the humorous meaning is not inherent but comes from the context which the caption is part of; A person with an amused facial expression is considered an individual without the caption. Three multimodal signs are introduced in the caption: Satan, hot stew and human suffering. The funny relationship between these two unrelated concepts provides incongruity to the meme interpretation.



Plate 3

Supernatural Personification



4.1.5 Hyperbole and Playful Subversion through Visual Signifiers of Material Indulgence

The meme in Plate 4 contains an image of a young child positioned confidently on a big chair with a huge amount of food served on the table with a one-word caption ... What I expect to see when I'm paying child support. This caption applies when someone is paying child maintenance and the child's child support payment is being used to provide a "materially indulgent lifestyle". The young lady on a chair represented the custodial parent who received or receives child support payment. Excessive food consumption and comfort is indicated by several plates of food that are displayed on the table. Child's facial expression and posture reflect privilege and good health. The meme playfully demonstrates that the child's standard of living is greatly enhanced by child support payments, and as much as anyone can help a child's well-being, that is what it's believed to do. It magnifies the advantages that the kid appears to be enjoying, thus establishing a limply humorous illustration of the parent's monetary responsibility.



Plate 4

Visual Signifiers of Material Indulgence

4.1.6 Corporate Conformity and the Juxtaposed Social Media Identity

In Figure 2, the meme caption presents a scenario in which when you're at a job interview and they pull up your Instagram, and as it happens, it's a job interview table, and a phone is set before you, and it shows you on Instagram, in a completely different, more controversial persona. The Instagram image of him is a different version from that of being seated at the side of the table, where he looks more composed and professional. The frog standing at the table represents professionalism, which is the way you appear in an interview in a formal setting. The caption while in the Job Interview and they pull up your Instagram page is a signifier that signifies a Job Interview. The Instagram photo is a clue to a secret personality and the photo may convey an opinion that is not in line with the opinion the interviewers are looking for professionally. The denotative level: image of a person sitting at a table with a phone showing a social media post. The connotative level would be a symbol for the struggle between the way one portrays oneself in a formal public context and an informal private one. The two images of a frog are juxtaposed, thus forming a visual metaphor of identity contradiction.



Figure 2

Visual Signifiers of Material Indulgence



4.1.7 Spatial Minimalism and

Additionally, Plate 5 shows a man playing a football video game in an empty room, with no one else around him. The blank wall represents simplicity, while the TV and game console denote the man's hobbies and interests, such as entertainment and leisure. There is no need for furniture seats, nor even any table, as the room contains all the man needs. A caption reads: A lady will enter this room and starts adding unnecessary things. The caption offers a context that makes the image funny and sheds light on the difference between men and women.



Plate 5

Signifiers of Simplicity

4.1.8 Institutional Authority and the Spectator-Facing Gaze

Humour is created through the interaction between the caption and accompanying image from a semiotic point of view in Plate 6. The nurse's uniform and stethoscope are symbols of medical authority and the professional role of the nurse in health care. These visual signs give the readers a clear indication, even before they read the caption, that they are about to be reading about the hospital setting. The nurse's expression is one that doesn't change and conveys the discomfort and silent disbelief. The nurse is neither smiling nor talking. The nurse seems stunned, having no idea what to do as he sees the visitors. The look reinforces the discomfort of the caption, and becomes the base of the source of amusement. The nurse's direct eye contact with the viewer adds to the humorous impact as if asking herself what to do. The picture is used to complement the caption, and conveys an emotional response to the surprising event.



Plate 6

Spectator-Facing Gaze



4.1.9 Reflecting Professional Deprivation through Animal Postures

In Plate 7, the caption indicates, 'Working in the bank be like... In the picture, there are large pieces of meat on a barbecue, with a dog sitting next to them, its tongue licking its chops, wishing to be served. It seems unable to access the meat; it gazes upward in an attentive posture, desiring to have the meat; the dog represents a person who is surrounded by something valuable but cannot possess it. The large chunks of meat signify wealth because the chunks of meat cannot be accessed by the dog; they signify something admired yet unattainable. The dogs' posture and facial expression signify longing to have a taste of the meat. Denotatively, however, the image represents the worker who uses valuable resources to work but who is not personally benefiting from those resources. The picture is accompanied by a text-caption that asks viewers to analyze the picture in the context of banking. The dog is equated with bank employees, and meat represents all the money they handle but not their own – that belongs to the customers!



Plate 7:

Professional Deprivation through Animal Postures

4.1.10 Kinship Dynamics and the Anxiety of Misplaced Domestic Suspicion

The meme caption in Figure 3, 'When I visit my relatives' house & someone loses their money & they start saying this has never happened before, accompanied by an image of a dog wearing a woolen cap, the dog's wide eyes semiotically, the dog's posture symbolizes fear and discomfort, although he has not stolen from them. The caption anchors by giving the context of the domestic visit, how money might be lost without the caption, and the dog's facial expression might mean something different. When suspicion is raised, both the caption and the image creates a comic effect.



Figure 3

Anxiety of Misplaced Domestic Suspicion



4.1.11 Gendered Relational Dynamics and Accountability

The meme in Plate 8 depicts a four-panel image showing, first, a woman clutching her chest in distress signifies struggle and discomfort; then the second panel shows she's reaching for an inhaler as if struggling to breathe, signifying a serious medical condition; then the third panel, a close grimace of pain, suggests the woman is experiencing extreme suffering, while the fourth panel, finally lying down in a hospital bed connected to a breathing equipment, signifies serious medical emergency. The caption admitting to be wrong and apologizing for the woman's condition symbolizes the perceived difficulty some people experience when admitting mistakes. The audience is nudged to read the whole sequence metaphorically rather than literally. Women apologizing, I felt as if it was an unendurable thing, it was physically painful. The hospital overhypes the concept.



Plate 8

Gendered Relational Dynamics and Accountability

4.1.12 Emotional Detachment and Solidarity Gestures

Plate 9 shows the meme caption ...Asking questions during lectures kills your aura... real men go home confused language and visual signs conveys meaning. Men who do not understand the language die without being courteous. 'Aura' is an internet slang term to mean 'confidence'. Real men are based on constructed notions of masculinity and the 'home' represents failure in the school. These are used together to create an ironic sentence that's about social image visual signs; the accompanying image depicts a person placing a reassuring hand on another person as you wear sunglasses. The sunglasses signify confidence and emotional detachment; the gesture signifies solidarity and emotional reassurance.

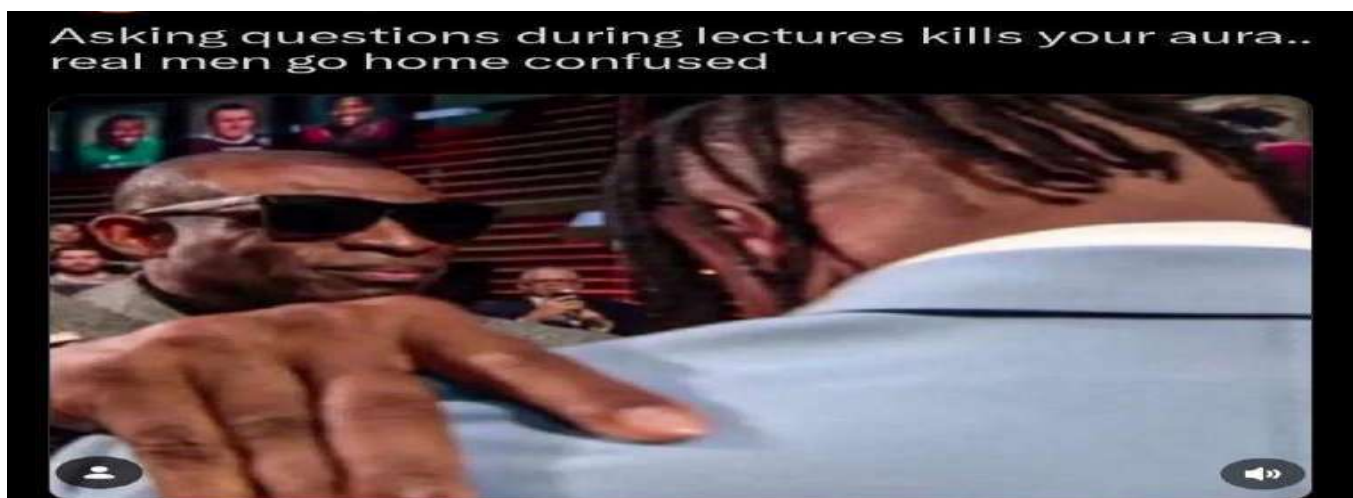


Plate 9

Emotional Detachment and Solidarity Gestures



4.1.13 Social Etiquette and Family Boundaries

In Plate 10, the young boy's facial expression, his teary eyes, lowered eyebrows and his hands on his face show disappointment and embarrassment. The posture of the boy helps to create the humorous effect, as his hands resting on one hand suggests helplessness and that he has been impacted by the message. The caption as well as the image is important in creating meaning, the image representing a child. Similarly, the texture of the emotion in the text and the image is not as fully realized as it is when the text and image are juxtaposed. The message does not explicitly show that the visitor overstayed his welcome or that there is little food left. The meme is based on implicature, the reader reads this meaning into the statement 'Tell your friend we want to eat.' Humour is produced when the audience understands the message that the visitor is not welcomed during the family mealtime. The meme critiques social etiquette, hospitality and the delicate balance between friendship and family boundaries. Respectful, the meme tells the audience to be sensitive to social cues and in a humorous way shows what it looks like.



Plate 10

Social Etiquette and Family Boundaries

4.1.14 Conditional Acceptance and Kinship Bonds

Moreover, in Plate 11 the phrase 'If you get pregnant, you will leave this house' meant that there were strict rules on pregnancy before marriage, while an image of an elder woman with her baby meant that she was enjoying her time with her grandchild before the warning, and a relaxed face and phone conversation meant acceptance of the child. The grandmother's carrying of the baby is a visual representation of love and joy. The picture implies that after a grandchild comes along she will have a total personality change.



Plate 11

Conditional Acceptance and Kinship Bonds



4.1.15 Pedagogical Irony and Classroom Norms

In Figure 4, the meme's linguistic signs very well symbolize teacher approval. Use your six words to form a sentence that creates conditions that encourage a literal interpretation of the instruction. State six words you can spell that create an instruction whose ambiguity gives rise to multiple interpretations. Humour occurs when the learner takes a literal interpretation to the question rather than a conventional interpretation. The picture represents a handwritten exercise book with red tick marks next to all the answers and a score of 10/10. The red ticks stand for rightness and effective execution are designed to be given when it is correct, not when it is wrong, encouraging rather than scaring the unconventional answers; the teacher's assessment adds to the humour of the incongruous. The handwritten presentation also adds to their authenticity; the notebook represents formal learning. The humorous message is then reinforced intersemiotically by the visual and textual elements.

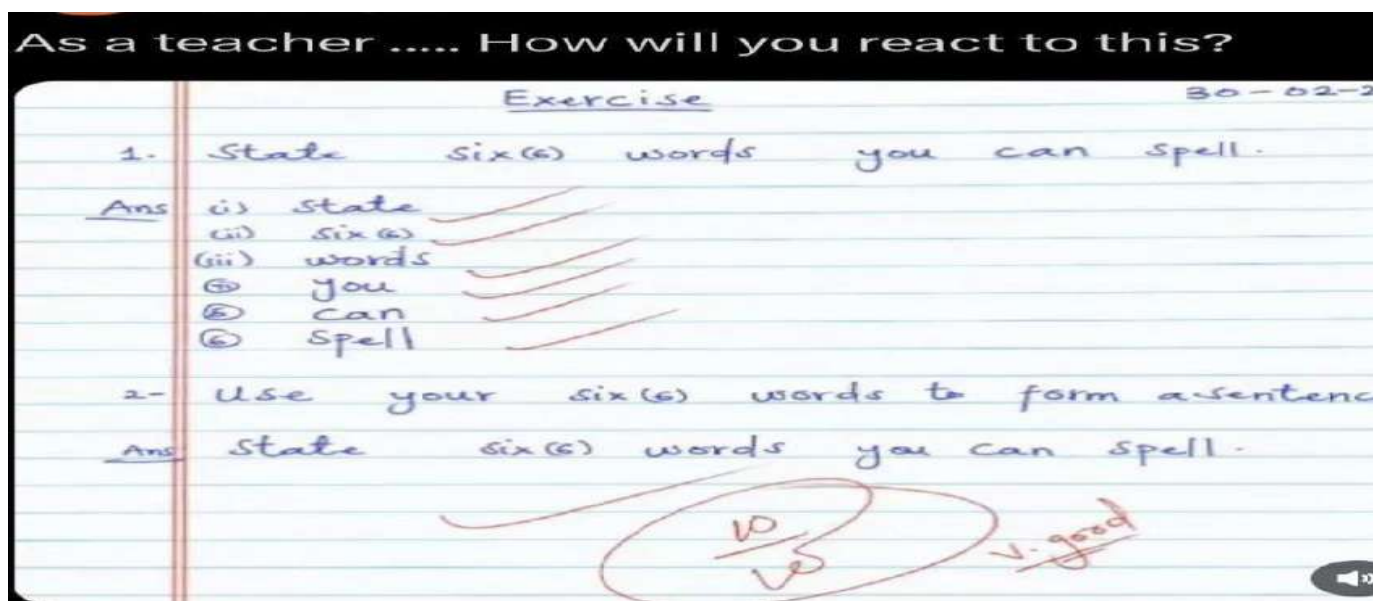


Figure 4

Pedagogical Irony and Classroom Norms

4.1.16 Academic Vindication and Institutional Triumph

In Plate 12, the meme caption 'When the lecturer who gave you a retake sees you in the graduation tent' The image shows a young man who is a graduate smiling confidently during a graduation ceremony. The graduation dress represents the academic accomplishments that the young man has earned, whether diploma, degree or master's. The lecturer is not in the image, only in the caption; here he or she exists. The caption provides the context necessary for understanding the image. If the caption was removed, the viewers would only see a smiling graduate. A student at the university may feel troubled upon failure to pass an exam and then retaking a course is an emotional burden for the students; if a student passes the course with a handicap, this is considered a success. In Universities, lecturers are considered as the authority figure who assesses the student's academic skills.

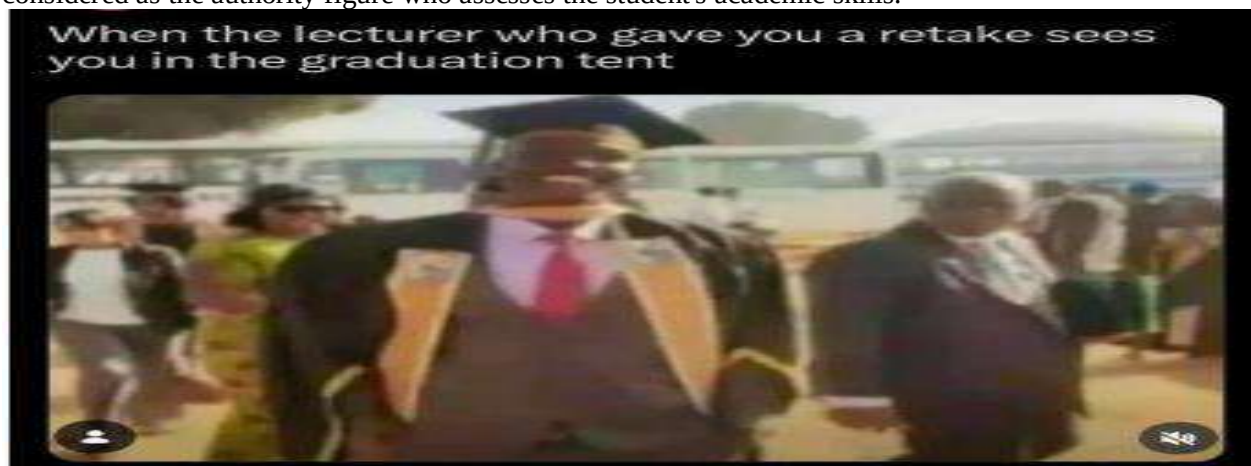


Plate 12

Academic Vindication and Institutional Triumph



4.1.17 Economic Realities and Generational Wealth

The textual sign in Figure 5 is 'I can't wait to start working so I can help my family' and 'me with my first pay cheque' which contradicts the promise made in the first sentence. The use of a casual style in the language helps make the meme accessible to a broader audience. SpongeBob Square Pants is an iconic sign, and a bright display of someone exhibiting their materialism. The funny RICH symbol on the jewelry is a sign of wealth, whereas the jewelry symbol represents unnecessary spending and SpongeBob symbol represents impulsive behaviour. The humorous message is fostered by these several symbols. Along with the jewelry they wear, the expensive shoes they wear, and the confidence with which they smile, it is a pointer to luxury and not financial responsibility.



Figure 5

Economic Realities and Generational Wealth

4.1.18 Multimodal Signifiers of Hard Work

In Figure 6, the meme caption... When someone walks across the floor you just cleaned. The accompanying image is a small dog dressed as a cleaner holding a broom and a bucket containing cleaning stuff, standing on a shiny tiled floor. The dog's facial expression signifies frustration, disappointment and annoyance the humour is generated when one relates to when someone walks carelessly across the floor. It is a minor annoyance and universal household sign, a small dog standing on its hind legs with a broom in its mouth means that an area has been cleaned. The broom and bucket symbolize tools of maintenance of cleanliness; the cleaned floor signifies hard work and accomplishment. The dog is symbolic of someone who has been making diligent efforts and then seeing their effort wasted after achieving something. The dog is used to represent human emotion. Human emotion is symbolized by a dog.



Figure 6

Multimodal Signifiers of Hard Work



4.1.19 Institutional Power and Petty Bureaucracy

Figure 7 contains the meme caption 'Traffic officers, after finding all your documents are valid... 'Why are you driving in Crocs? The traffic officer checks out all the driver's documents and then asks what the driver is doing with inappropriate footwear so he can assess a penalty. The traffic officers are a symbol of power and authority to check drivers; the dog's expression means suspicion, and the caption means unnecessary questioning. Meaning is brought together by both the caption and the visual elements.



Figure 7
Institutional Power and Petty Bureaucracy

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The analysis of the data given on the memes indicated that visual resources added meaning to the caption and other linguistic elements to create something amusing. In this study, the humour did not occur from the caption alone or image alone in memes, but from the relationship between the caption and image. Pragmatically, humour in Kenyan Instagram memes is not explicitly stated, rather it is conveyed through implied meanings such as irony, sarcasm, incongruity, exaggeration and implicature, which prompts viewers to make inferences about the intended meaning of the meme. Interpretation relied on background knowledge and contextual assumptions, which allowed users to capture the message intended by the humor. Semiotics in the study helped to analyse visual signs such as images, facial expressions and symbols. Humour in Kenyan Instagram memes has multiple communicative purposes: it helps to critique and evaluate social relations management without conflict, it is a mechanism for observing society by commenting on the healthcare experiences, economic hardship, social relations, education, and everyday social situations. However, humour in Kenyan Instagram memes promotes social bonding and solidarity by allowing meme creators and users to connect through shared experiences, common struggles and shared understanding. Kenyan Instagram memes are multimodal communicative acts, where the semiotics resources and pragmatic inferences are both in concert to create humour and social meanings.

5.2 Recommendations

Future researchers should expand this framework to explore how localized slang and specific regional languages influence the pragmatic decoding of memes across different demographics in Kenya. While Instagram provides a rich visual landscape, future studies should also conduct comparative analyses with fast-evolving platforms like TikTok and X to evaluate how different algorithmic structures and formats alter user interaction and humor delivery. Public health sectors, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations should actively study these findings to design public awareness campaigns. Using established meme frameworks like relational irony or relatable daily struggles can make complex policies or civic information highly accessible and culturally resonant.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



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