

# A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN MEME CULTURE IN DIGITAL ERA

Fadia Mahardika<sup>1</sup>, Andi Irlina<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari Banjarmasin

<sup>2</sup>Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari Banjarmasin

Email: [fadia.mahardika@gmail.com](mailto:fadia.mahardika@gmail.com) [andiirlina@uin-antasari.ac.id](mailto:andiirlina@uin-antasari.ac.id)

## ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menelaah peran bahasa dalam budaya meme dari perspektif sosiolinguistik pada lanskap digital Indonesia. Studi ini menjelaskan bagaimana meme berfungsi sebagai ekspresi humor sekaligus media komentar sosial di platform populer seperti Twitter (X) dan TikTok. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang menggabungkan etnografi digital dan analisis konten, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi interaksi pengguna, pola wacana, serta pertukaran meme untuk mengungkap bagaimana bahasa mencerminkan dan membentuk praktik budaya daring. Melalui etnografi digital, penelitian ini mengamati komunikasi dan pembentukan makna dalam komunitas daring secara langsung, sedangkan analisis konten digunakan untuk menelaah meme terpilih berdasarkan ciri linguistik, alih kode, strategi humor, dan referensi budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meme berfungsi sebagai artefak sosiolinguistik yang dinamis yang menampilkan humor, kritik sosial, dan pembentukan identitas di kalangan generasi muda Indonesia. Strategi linguistik seperti ironi, satire, dan intertekstualitas digunakan untuk mengekspresikan emosi, menantang norma sosial, dan membangun identitas budaya. Secara keseluruhan, bahasa dalam meme menggambarkan pola komunikasi digital yang terus berkembang serta memberikan wawasan tentang transformasi sosial budaya dalam masyarakat digital Indonesia.

**Keywords : Sosiolinguistik, budaya sosial, meme, digital**

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of language in meme culture from a sociolinguistic perspective within Indonesia's digital landscape. It examines how memes function as both humorous expressions and vehicles of social commentary across popular platforms such as Twitter (X) and TikTok. Using a qualitative methodology that combines digital ethnography and content analysis, the research explores user interactions, discourse patterns, and meme exchanges to uncover how language reflects and shapes online cultural practices. Digital ethnography allows for observation of real-time communication and meaning-making within online communities, while content analysis systematically examines selected memes based on linguistic features, code-mixing, humor strategies, and cultural references. The findings reveal that memes operate as dynamic sociolinguistic artifacts that convey humor, critique, and identity formation among young Indonesians. Linguistic strategies such as irony, satire, and intertextuality are employed to express shared emotions, challenge societal norms, and negotiate cultural identities. Ultimately, the study concludes that meme language represents evolving patterns of digital communication and creativity, illustrating how online spaces foster flexible and context-sensitive language use. Understanding these linguistic phenomena provides valuable insight into the broader sociocultural transformations shaping communication in Indonesia's contemporary digital society.

**Keywords : Sociolinguistics, social culture, meme, digital**

## INTRODUCTION

In the modern digital era, memes have become an integral part of social media communication as a method to use humor against the background of social and cultural dynamics. Memes use language and images in ways that are humorous, sarcastic, or critical of a phenomenon. The cultural and social context in which memes are created and shared largely determines attitudes towards humor in memes. The cultural context, social norms, and values learned by a group of individuals greatly influence the understanding and appreciation of humor in memes. Fajar (2022) examined the phenomenon of satirical language in social media memes and concluded that satirical language styles are used to convey criticism of viral issues, which means that memes not only function as entertainment but also as a tool of social criticism. Therefore, a sociolinguistic study of the function of language in meme culture is important to understand how cultural factors influence the understanding of humor on social media in various social communities.

Previous research has proven that cultural context has an important impact on the translation and interpretation of cross-cultural humor. Kurniawan (2024) underlined the difficulties in translating cross-cultural humor and emphasized the importance of cultural adaptation to guarantee humor can be accepted by cross-cultural audiences. In addition, Dianastiti et al (2020) established that social media memes are a reflection of multicultural culture, depicting cultural diversity in society. Shara and Iriyansah (2024) also found various language use strategies in memes to create humorous effects, indicating that language styles such as sarcasm, satire, and irony are used in memes to produce humorous messages. "Folklore is not merely a vehicle for instilling noble manners; rather, it is a key component in the development of character from an early age." (Irlina, 2024). However, these studies are still constrained in answering the question of how the audience's cultural heritage affects the understanding of humor in memes. This study seeks to fill this space by examining sociolinguistically how cultural features influence

the semantics of humor in memes across different social communities.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative methodology through a combination of digital ethnography and content analysis as the main methodological approach. Digital ethnography was used to collect and interpret user interactions and meme exchanges between two major social media platforms: Twitter (X) and TikTok. This approach focuses on the online environment so as to capture contextual meaning-making and sociocultural dynamics that occur in real time. As a complement, content analysis was used to systematically examine the selected memes in terms of linguistic properties, language variation, cultural figures of speech, and humor strategies. The combination of these methods provides a comprehensive picture of how online memes function as sociolinguistic objects in contemporary social media culture in Indonesia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

In the digital world, memes become expressive tools that represent the social, cultural and linguistic dynamics of a community. Memes not only function as humor, but also as a medium of criticism, reflection of identity, and symbol of solidarity. Below are eight popular memes in Indonesia analyzed through a sociolinguistic approach, including aspects of pragmatics, irony, social representation, and language style.

#### 1. "It's okay, the important thing is to be happy"

The meme "Gapapa, yang penting happy" ("It's okay, the important thing is to be happy"), shared via TikTok account @adit.biasaaja in 2024, is an excellent instance of the use of pragmatic irony to veil distress or discomfort. The meme frequently takes follow-up shots at videos featuring commonplace challenges—money problems, relationship problems, or trouble in school—paired with the cheerful insistence that everything is fine as long as one is "happy." Such a contrast creates a tension between apparent happiness and profound sadness, a feature of Gen Z's affective tactics in social media. At the linguistic level, the statement functions as an emotional euphemism, downplaying troubles while preserving face in a public virtual environment.

Sociolinguistically, this meme accounts for the emergence of resilience discourse among youth such that humor is used to resist vulnerability, create group solidarity, and implicitly resist the demand to be good-looking at all times in the presence of structural or personal adversity.

## 2. "Ngabers Lore"

The "Ngabers lore" meme that circulated on Twitter (X) in the early part of 2025, especially around tweets from @tukangkomen, is the result of new creative slang and sociolinguistic labeling. "Ngabers" is a creative spelling of "bang" (the informal male greeting version of "bro"), and it makes use of the word "lore" borrowed from computer slang and fandom culture to indicate background story or mythology. The term is used to describe—and often satirize—young teenage boys who adopt flashy fashion, motorbike culture, and hypermasculine selves. The lexical play utilized here not only identifies Gen Z's code manipulation and global digital borrowing of vocabulary, but also as a social gatekeeping tool that demarcates familiarity within the in-group and city-residence markers. The meme is a performance of categorization, where style is symbolic capital and the "Ngabers" are constructed as culturally other (and typically inferior) others. It is a representation of endemic class conflicts, regional urbanity, and performative masculinity within Indonesian youth culture, where memes also become spaces of resistance and reinscription of social norms.

## 3. "Why do guys have to try first?"

The TikTok meme "Kenapa harus cowok yang usaha duluan?" ("Why do guys have to try first?"), popularized by producers like @siskabersuara in mid-2024, captures a gendered discursive shift being enacted in online youth communities. Posited as a rhetorical question within short skits or sarcastic monologues, the meme serves to resist entrenched patriarchal norms in straight relationships, in which men are required to make advances towards romantic interest. Since the language remains colloquial and intimate, its illocutionary force is to overturn gender asymmetries in a satirical manner. The significance of the meme lies in its indexical inversion—using everyday speech to index deep critiques of social expectations, thus subverting gender roles through plain language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the trend reflects the

emerging feminist consciousness in Gen Z's discourse practices as TikTok is utilized to form personal experience in reworking hegemonic cultural scripts in romance and relationship labor.

## 4. "Insecure in the morning"

The meme "Pagi-pagi sudah insecure" ("Insecure in the morning"), a widespread meme in late 2024's trending Twitter memes, such as that of @curhatrekeh, exemplifies performative comparison and the efficacy of digital envy to create digital affect. Used in reaction to morning sightings of success gym sessions, professional upgrades, or "soft life" shots, it expresses a playful sense of inadequacy triggered by others' filtered digital lives. Operationally, the meme uses self-deprecation as a strategy for managing the emotional dissonance between the offline world and the seamless achievements projected online. Sociolinguistically, the meme speaks to the digital emotional economy, where individuals both evaluate and participate in social comparison. It also voices a shared concern for productivity and image management values highly valued in digital capitalist cultures while simultaneously unifying individuals in the communal impostor syndrome.

## 5. "Work overtime, get paid with „keep fighting“"

"Kerja lembur, dibayar pakai 'semangat ya'" ("Work overtime, get paid with 'keep fighting'"), a meme that was widely shared as a result of satirical TikTok videos from handles like @karyawanlucu in 2024, is condemning the exploitation underlying modern workplace culture. The meme satirizes how weak motivational speeches, such as "semangat ya" (stay strong), are used by seniors instead of actual material compensation. On a material level, it is false politeness: it formally meets a social obligation but covers up institutional apathy towards working conditions. Discursively, the meme points to the underestimation of affective labor, especially in service or office settings, where burnout becomes legalized and resistance becomes deflected into humor. This meme is a critical discursive space of critique of work that defies the neoliberal promotion of overwork and "hustle culture" by recasting motivational discourse as sarcasm and thus articulating worker identity conflict with indifference systems.

## 6. "Not poor, just not rich yet"

"Bukan miskin, cuma belum kaya aja" ("Not poor, but not rich yet"), frequently uttered under #sarkasindonesia on Twitter in 2024-2025, employs economic euphemism to veil economic hardship. The statement wears a positive face with sarcastic undertones, thus simultaneously naturalizing economic hardship and subverting capitalist meritocracy. This meme reveals how speakers negotiate personal economic limitations against cultural standards of success through speech that saves face while playfully mocking improbability of mobility. Sociolinguistically, this meme indexes ideological tension between aspiration and stasis, echoing the insecurity felt by many millennials and Gen Z workers in the gig economy. It also shows how language becomes a means of stigma management through humor, hence producing a sense of shared struggle and performative hope.

#### 7. "I am yes!"

"aku sih iya!" or in English we say "I am yes!", originally popular from talent shows, is now used sarcastically on TikTok to respond to failure or rejection. This affirmative phrase is contextualized as a sign of defeat or resignation. This change in meaning shows how young people utilize intertextuality that is, taking quotes from other media and repurposing them with new meanings. In sociolinguistic terms, this shows how creative social media users are in building communication with a language that is only understood by a certain community, which is referred to as a form of digital solidarity.

#### 8. "I'm strong, just tired"

Last, the "I'm strong, I'm just tired" meme has been widely used on TikTok since 2024 to convey feeling emotionally exhausted, but still wanting to appear strong. It's an example of a face-saving strategy - trying to show that someone is okay when they're not. In a digital context, this meme is a safe way to express mental exhaustion without appearing weak. From a sociolinguistic point of view, this meme is a means of building empathy and emotional connections between users who feel pressured by the demands of life but still want to show resilience.

### Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that digital memes serve not only as entertainment, but also as expressive tools for negotiating social norms,

emotional states, and cultural identities in Indonesian online communities. The use of irony in phrases such as "It's okay, the important thing is to be happy" and "Work overtime, get paid using keep fighting" reflects a broader tendency towards emotional masking and veiled criticism through humor—a mechanism also identified by Tian and Zheng (2022) as an important element in multimodal discourse amid stressful social conditions. These examples are in line with Gómez-Cruz and San Cornelio's (2021) view that memes serve as an aesthetic performance of subcultural critique, allowing users—especially generation Z—to voice disappointment or resistance in a socially acceptable and relatable way. In addition, the memes demonstrate the use of informal and colloquial language that aligns with the speech practices of digital natives, as also observed by Khoirunnisa and Suryadi (2023) in their study of Gen Z's linguistic behavior on TikTok.

More than just humor and emotional expression, memes such as "Ngabers lore" and "Not poor, just not rich yet" play an important role in shaping social categorization and identity narratives. Creative uses of slang and linguistic reversals (e.g., "ngab" from "bang") reveal the evolving language landscape in digital spaces, as discussed by Zappavigna (2020), who emphasizes the role of online metadiscourse in building group solidarity. Meanwhile, Lim (2021) points out that memes on Indonesian social media also reflect broader issues such as class tensions and performative image culture, often through an ironic engagement with aspirational lifestyles and influencer culture. In addition, Tagg and Evans (2020) highlight how intertextuality and metapragmatic clues in memes, such as the reinterpreted phrase "i am yes!", allow users to play with meaning and critique popular media through layered linguistic references. Overall, these findings suggest that memes function not only as tools of humor and social bonding, but also as sociolinguistic artifacts that reflect, reproduce, and sometimes challenge dominant cultural narratives circulating in Indonesian digital society. In addition to reflecting social and emotional dynamics, the use of language in memes also shows how digital communities form new linguistic norms that are flexible and dynamic. Variations in language style, the use of code-mixing, and the structure of utterances adapted to the visual format of memes show a very contextual pragmatic adaptation. This phenomenon strengthens the argument that digital language is not static, but is always negotiated in fast-paced and fluid online interactions. In this context, as argued by Zappavigna (2020), the language of social media

creates space for users to display identity and social affiliation through mutually recognizable discursive practices. Thus, memes become not only a cultural product, but also an evolving socio-linguistic process, where the boundaries between jokes, criticism and self representation become blurred yet meaningful.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that memes in the Indonesian digital context function as dynamic sociolinguistic expressions that encapsulate humor, resistance, and identity. Through linguistic strategies such as irony, satire, code-mixing, and intertextuality, digital memes act as a medium for cultural reflection and social negotiation. They offer insights into how younger generations express emotional states, critique social norms, and construct community identities in online spaces. Memes also demonstrate how digital communication fosters new, flexible language practices that continuously evolve with cultural trends. Thus, understanding meme language from a sociolinguistic perspective is essential to grasp the broader socio-cultural transformations occurring in Indonesia's digital society.

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