

Cohesive Aspects of Humor in Internet Memes on Facebook: A Multimodal Sociolinguistic Analysis

Ondřej Procházka

University of Ostrava

Abstract

This paper explores the cohesive capacity of internet memes within the communal and multimodal environment of Facebook. Attention is paid specifically to Countryball memes gathered and analyzed in the context of the POLANDBALL community. The paper proposes that the cohesiveness of the community rests on its inclination to linguistic as well as social homogeneity, based on disparagement humor revolving around cultural and national stereotypes. Grounded in the Social Identity Approach, stereotyping is analyzed as a cohesive device with respect to the multimodal dimensions of memetic communication and its recurring linguistic properties.

Keywords: cohesion, internet memes, disparagement humor, political correctness, stereotypes, Social Identity Approach

1. Theoretical background

The internet has revolutionized the way we communicate on an unprecedented scale. Its new features and capabilities have become amalgamated into a multifaceted and multimodal medium which has completely transformed social

communication practices in the past twenty years. The internet has not only accelerated the speed, ease, and reach of human communication; it has also brought novel communication techniques giving rise to computer-mediated (virtual) communities of people sharing the same or similar experience, interests, values, and morals. Given the multimodal nature of the internet, members of virtual communities are able to disseminate any piece of information combining visual, textual, or auditory elements. It is argued that “as more of our world moves into online spaces, social media platforms become a central fountainhead for dispersed communities to share innovative ideas and original artifacts, as well as contribute to the discussions around those ideas” (Peppler and Solomou 11).

This paper views these “innovative ideas and original artifacts” as internet memes. The term ‘meme’ was coined by the British ethnologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his landmark work *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins defines a meme as a “unit of cultural transmission” analogous to the gene as a replicator of biological data. Almost 40 years later, the term has been revived to describe digital objects containing “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (Davidson 122). There are, however, many approaches and perspectives that reflect the complex nature of this phenomenon. Carlos Díaz has recently analyzed and contrasted different memetic definitional frameworks in an effort to develop a formal characterization that could be used to study internet memes in various contexts:

An internet meme is a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve. The mutation on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice versa. The mutation occurs by chance, addition or parody, and its form is not relevant. An IM depends both on a carrier and a social context where the transporter acts as a filter and decides what can be passed on. It spreads horizontally as a virus at a fast and accelerating speed. It can be interactive (as a game), and some people relate them with creativity. Its mobility, storage, and reach are web-based (Hard disks, cell phones, servers, cloud, etc.). They can be manufactured (as in the case of the viral marketing) or emerge (as an offline event taken online). Its goal is to be known well enough to replicate within a group. (97)

As Díaz suggests, internet memes have sparked considerable discussion as objects of academic investigation. Their pervasive nature often serves as “prism(s) for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture” (Shifman 9). Much current research is focused on memetic spread and distribution (Bauckhage, 2011; Shifman and Thelwall, 2009) and the role of internet memes in public discourse (Phillips, 2012; Milner, 2013; Rintel 2011). As far as social media are concerned,

there is a substantial body of research on their participation in the digitalization of communication and media in general (cf. Wiggins and Bowers, 2014; Jantke et al., 2012), yet the effect of internet memes on virtual communities remains largely unexplored.

It is evident from Diaz's definition that memetic transmission thrives in a computer-mediated environment (i.e. virtual communities), considering the fact that a successful meme needs to be rapidly replicated (fecundity) with a sustainable replication pattern (longevity) while maintaining its original form (fidelity) (Dawkins 149). In other words, virtual communities may serve as efficient conductors of internet memes, and this is due to multiple reasons. Firstly, virtual communities are grounded in Web 2.0 platforms that ensure ample functionality for sharing and archiving the memetic content; this reinforces longevity, as the memetic content is constantly disseminated and subsequently stored. Secondly, virtual communities allow their members to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins 8), which ensures rapid replication of the memetic content, and thus its fecundity. Finally, sharing only the memetic content in line with the interests or ideology of the particular community maintains fidelity and, as this paper argues, also maintains the cohesiveness of the community.

To reveal the mechanics of cohesiveness in virtual communities, this paper examines the *POLANDBALL* community, which is dedicated to a specific kind of internet meme commonly known as *Polandball* or *Countryball*. The meme involves user-generated cartoons with poorly drawn balls, each carrying the color schemes associated with a particular country's flag and usually communicating in 'broken English'. The community was established on 11 November 2009 and now, at the time of writing (July 2015), it has over 215,000 followers, i.e. people who 'liked' the community. Its description summarizes *Countryballs* as a type of geopolitical satire meme that was "originally featured in the multi-pane comic series that became popular in /INT/ (international) board on Krautchan, a German-language imageboard community similar to 4chan. These user-generated cartoons typically follow the lives of ball-shaped creatures representing different countries (also known as *Countryballs*) and 'international drama' surrounding their diplomatic relations" (*POLANDBALL* "About" n. pag.).

As the description suggests, *Countryballs* are meant to poke fun at national and cultural stereotypes in an unconventional way, and Facebook provides an excellent outlet. Its multimodal interface allows members of the groups and communities such as *POLANDBALL* not only to view and spread the memetic content further, but also to react to it via the comment section. The community expands its reach with each new member; according to the Facebook Help Center, simple 'liking' (i.e. giving positive feedback and connecting with things you care about) is enough because it "lets people know that you enjoy it without leaving a comment" ("Like" n. pag.). Other users (i.e. friends) might be subsequently notified of such activities thanks to the News Feed algorithm, which is designed to manage

“the constantly updating list of stories in the middle of your home page, [including] status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes from people, Pages and groups that you follow on Facebook” (“How News Feed Works” n. pag.). This means that the communities on Facebook can grow even without the active participation of their members in terms of commenting or otherwise expanding a community’s content. Given its size and activity, the *POLANDBALL* community is an interesting subject for a preliminary case study of the cohesive properties of memetic humor in a virtual community.

This paper does not intend to present a comprehensive analysis of the Countryball memes in their entirety; the corpus is limited to three Countryball comics and 31 comments posted between April and September 2014, illustrating only the most common features of the *POLANDBALL* community. Instead, the paper lays the foundations for a more detailed sociolinguistic study exploring the synergy between the linguistic and social cohesion of memetic communication in the multimodal milieu of social network websites, particularly Facebook.

The section presenting the theoretical framework for this study delineates some of the most important concepts of relevance to the virtual communities on Facebook within the larger scope of social networking sites (SNSs) and their accommodation of internet memes. It then presents an analysis of humor in internet memes – specifically, disparagement humor and its cohesive function within the *POLANDBALL* community. The cohesive aspects of disparagement humor are approached from both linguistic and social perspectives. The former employs a contrastive approach with two aims; first, to examine the underlying manifestations of linguistic interference which form the linguistic identities of the individual Countryballs; and second, to outline the basic features of the ‘Countryball variety’ of English, which is based on a number of recurring solecisms which have evolved into a set of conventions grounded in disparaging stereotypes. In addressing the second aim, I adopt the Social Identity Approach (Martineau, 1972; Fergusson and Ford, 2008), which incorporates Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et. al 1987). Mirroring the cohesive patterns of linguistic stereotyping, this social approach examines the perpetuation and reinforcement of disparaging stereotypes as a campaign against political correctness, a practice which binds the community together and strengthens social cohesion. The results are discussed in the final section together with possible avenues for further research.

1.1 Virtual communities and social networking sites

A virtual community consists of four important elements: “people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles; a shared purpose that provides a reason for the community; policies that guide people’s

interactions; and computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness” (Preece 10). Virtual communities may thus be considered social aggregations that facilitate public discussion and personal relationships through electronic media, such as social media platforms.

Social media platforms – social networking sites (SNSs) in particular – have recently been in the spotlight of academic interest due to their extensive affordances and reach. Millions of people access various SNSs on a daily basis; for example, Facebook has over 865 million daily active users.¹ As a social phenomenon, Facebook has increasingly been attracting attention in diverse fields such as sociology, psychology, education, law, communications, and media studies, resulting in a substantial body of work regarding its social, technical, and political ramifications (cf. Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis, 2013; Cheung, Chiu, and Lee, 2011; Kushin and Kitchener 2009). There are a number of reasons why social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace enjoy immense worldwide popularity. Firstly, their highly customizable interface and nearly unrestricted environment provide fertile ground for users to express themselves in a variety of ways. Secondly, they offer multiple kinds of interaction and participation by virtue of the combined power of one-way (broadcasted message to audience) and two-way (author and respondent) communication (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Thirdly, the design of their technological infrastructure contributes significantly to social cohesion in virtual communities and the achievement of their goals (Karpova, Correia, and Baran, 2009; Moffat & McLean, 2009).

SNSs are often defined within the framework of Web 2.0 – a term encompassing a set of online technologies and services that have changed the pattern of participation and collaboration in the field of interpersonal interaction. O’Reilly contends that collective intelligence and participation bring radical decentralization and augmented user capabilities:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an ‘architecture of participation’, and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (28)

This suggests that Web 2.0, as a platform for co-operation, enables the transformation of readers into writers. Gillmor notes that “the Web has been transformed into a read/write-Web” in which all users can “write, not just read, in ways never before possible. For the first time in history, at least in the developed world, anyone with a computer and Internet connection could own a press. Just about anyone could make the news” (29).

The scholarship addressing Web 2.0 has engendered discussions addressing its utilization in various contexts, such as marketing, healthcare, education, or government (Zajicek 2007; Wilshusen, 2010; Boulos and Wheeler, 2007; Tredinick, 2006). As for virtual communities, Web 2.0 provides their members with services such as content creation (i.e. establishing groups, communities, entertainment websites, fan pages, etc.), bookmarking, tagging, commenting, reviewing, ranking, evaluating, or sharing. All these services enhance an individual's ability to post content on the internet. The products of Web 2.0 also encourage a participatory culture which "has relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" and whose members "believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins xi).

According to Mojdeh, there are three general categories of Web 2.0 social websites: social networks (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn), publicators (e.g., Wikipedia or Blogger), and aggregators (e.g. Reddit or Digg) (18-20). Social networks are based on two-way communication intended to connect people and promote further socialization. On the other hand, publicators employ predominantly only one-way communication for sharing personal thoughts (weblogs) and facts (wikis) with a wider audience. Aggregators utilize both types of communication, as their main function is to provide a venue for diverse content generated by individuals which can be consequently commented upon and/or voted 'up' or 'down' by other users to gauge its popularity.

The boundaries between each type are fuzzy rather than clear-cut, especially when it comes to internet memes. Both aggregator and publicator websites may benefit from the multimodal nature of internet memes, allowing their users to make more complex contributions. Multimodality, intertextuality and other qualities of internet memes expand the means of expression as well as the level of obscurity for new users. As a result, many wiki-like websites (e.g. *Know Your Meme* or *The Meme Wikia*) have appeared in an effort to elucidate the workings and development of particular memes by "more experienced participants", as Jenkins suggests. It is, however, outside the scope of this study to analyze the publicator and aggregator websites; the focus here is limited only to SNSs, namely Facebook.

1.2 Facebook and internet memes

As has already been stated, electronic media based on the Web 2.0 technology have altered the significance of time and space for social interaction. The emergence of Facebook in 2004 allowed internet users to connect with one another on a hitherto unparalleled scale, as its mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected

with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Facebook "About" n. pag.).

It can be seen that the purpose of Facebook rests on connectedness and communality in order to create and maintain friendships and relationships online. This is largely possible thanks to the asynchronous type of communication which enables the intermittent transmission of information. Facebook affords its users the ability to communicate or collaborate regardless of their geographic location and time zone; the interaction takes place at different times but in the same place. Unlike in synchronous communication, multiple threads from multiple contributors may be simultaneously developed without interruption. The number of participants thus seems virtually unlimited, and SNSs such as Facebook have proved to be "versatile environments for sharing knowledge and keeping abreast of what is going on even within large networks of people" (Kauppila et al. 414). Given its interconnected character, Facebook gives space for multifarious communities, following and contributing to the flow and flux of various online phenomena, including internet memes. Bauckhage argues that "the majority of currently famous Internet memes spreads through homogenous communities and social networks rather than through the Internet at large" (49). As digital objects, the memes are habitually circulated, imitated, and transformed by individuals in their particular virtual communities, leading to a shared and homogenized cultural experience. By comparing virtual and physical social circles, danah boyd distinguishes four infrastructural features of Facebook as well as other SNSs that are highly conducive to memetic communication:

Replicability: Digital objects are infinitely and perfectly reproducible. Easily used and free social media provide multiple and exponential channels for distribution, breaking the economic, cultural, and generation barriers to distribution of pre-Internet cultural industries. For most objects, no matter the creator or licensing regime, its form is replicable and thus exploitable. *Searchability*: Objects of popular and folk culture are easily found via search engines, especially as meta-data tags improves the indexing and curation of digital objects. As such both raw materials and templates for generating objects are easily found. *Persistence*: Although digital objects may not last as long as analogue objects, they are infinitely transferable and storable, and they certainly persist far longer than the ephemerality of co-present interaction. *Invisible Audiences*: Digital objects are double articulations, created (by either cultural industries or individuals) for a particular audience but with the knowledge that they can and will spread to an unknowable audience wherever the Internet is available. (126)

Dawkins's conditions for successful memetic transmission correspond with boyd's model of SNSs' infrastructural features; fecundity and fertility are sustained by *replicability*, while longevity is maintained by *searchability* and *per-*

sistence. Moreover, *invisible audiences* (users' anonymity) also contribute to memetic transmission by disavowing any responsibility for their role in diffusing memetic content which is not always in accord with accepted standards of conduct. The inability to identify anonymous users enables the spread of such behaviors. Despite the fact that Facebook requires some identification details when creating an account, such as a name or a valid email address, there is no authentication mechanism ensuring a match between the real identity of the user and his or her Facebook identity.

Kostantineas and Vlachos explain this departure from the generally accepted notion of appropriateness in terms of the moral relativism found in online humorous discourse. Members of virtual communities, especially those who publicize internet memes, frequently articulate humorous expressions with the 'for teh lulz' (for laugh) attitude – "a phrase that suggests an unconditional and unbounded tendency towards bantering about issues considered off limits due to seriousness or compassion. Based on that point of view, there is no image of pain, illness or misfortune that deserves to remain immaculately above a humorous scope" (4).

For this reason, virtual communities on Facebook, such as *POLANDBALL*, frequently include unorthodox humorous features lacking any political correctness. It is true that many SNSs, and Facebook in particular, require consent to strict terms of service which prohibit indecent or illegal conduct and the propagation of such material, yet it is clearly stated there is no guarantee of users' safety (cf. Facebook Statement of Rights and Responsibilities). Should a Facebook user or community publicize deplorable content and this content provokes a sufficient number of reports from other users, it might be marked as insensitive or removed. Further infringement might result in a permanent termination of the user's account or the shutting-down of the whole community (cf. Oboler 2012).

2. Analysis

Humorous discourse realized via virtual communities and internet memes is characterized by several distinct qualities. Formally, the memetic humor is characterized mostly by textuality in combination with images, videos, hyperlinks, and other features offered by the multimodal virtual environments. Functionally, memetic humor serves as a form of glue that holds the virtual communities together. This cohesive capacity, as this paper argues, rests on their aberrant content, which makes them an antithesis to political correctness and polite or diplomatic language. This is particularly visible in the Countryball memes.

Countryball comics function as geopolitical satire, deriving their humor from the absence of decorum and avoiding linguistic appropriateness by exaggerating national and cultural stereotypes. In fact, Countryball memes have developed a distinctive linguistic variety that seems to directly oppose diplomatic language



Example 1. Posted on 12.4.2014

and the language of political correctness. Its properties will be analyzed within the unique virtual environment of the *POLANDBALL* community, which also brings the opportunity to survey not only the locutions and illocutions of the memes, but also their perlocutions – with reference to the comments posted by the community members in reaction to the Countryball memes. Again, this would be not possible without the “architecture of participation” embodied in Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 28).

The first example appeared in the *POLANDBALL* community on 12th April 2014, just one day after the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, visited Greece, where she said to a group of Greek entrepreneurs: “I firmly believe that after a very, very tough phase, this country harbors boundless possibilities still to be exploited” (Smith n. pag.). The “tough phase” here refers to the series of austerity measures enacted by the Greek government since 2010 in order to qualify for the EU-IMF loan packages, with Germany figuring as a major holdout. These austerity measures can be interpreted as a “solution it is unorthodox” that is demanded by Germanyball in the comic. The adjective ‘unorthodox’ is used deliberately,

as it signals a rather negative notion of unconventionality (the social repercussions of austerity), as well as an allusion to the Orthodox Churches of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, further highlighted by the Orthodox crosses.

The first example illustrates some well-known German and Balkan stereotypes. Germans are viewed as sticklers for efficiency, punctuality and orderliness. In contrast, the Balkan region is generally seen as a symbol of economic and political instability (‘balkanization’); the Balkan states – especially Greece, and to a lesser extent Romania along with Bulgaria – are often viewed as rather lazy, corrupt, and prone to overspending (cf. PRC 2012). In the comic, it is probably the profligate spending that is the reason why “current work paradigm - ist not working”, in addition to the purported lackadaisical work ethic and government malfeasance on the part of Romania, Bulgaria, and chiefly Greece. Eventually, Germanyball makes an overbearing attempt to ‘fix the problem’. Although all of the featured states are sovereign and equal members of the EU, Germanyball clearly maintains its social distance – another German stereotype. Moreover, using the vocative “valued em-

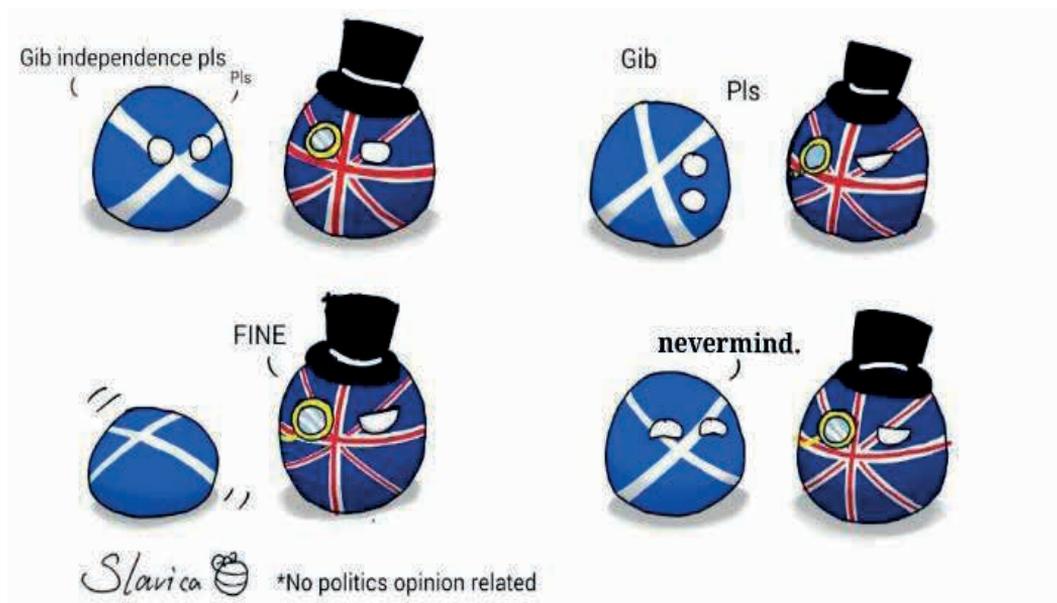
ployee” in lieu of a standard salutation marks a superordinate and distant relationship with the addressee and satirizes the value-oriented pragmatism displayed by Germany. The example obviously contains a number of overt linguistic markers indexing a German identity (e.g. “ist”, “outside auf der box”, or “kan”); these will be discussed in the following section.



Figure 1. Some of the POLANDBALL community members commenting on example 1; extracted from the Facebook comment interface (i.e. the comment section). Last and middle names have been blacked out for privacy reasons.

The excerpted comments below the first example refer mostly to various associations related to the featured countries and the Orthodox religion. Greg and Lazar further develop the German stereotypes suggested by the comic, though they employ different means. While Lazar utilizes another Countryball comic propounding the stereotypical assumption that modern Germans are succeeding in conquering Europe by means of trade and financial discipline instead of warfare (i.e. the ‘Fourth Reich’), Greg identifies with the original style and accentuates the German penchant for efficiency. Some of the comments use religious caricature and persiflage. Łukasz presents a rather infamous substitute for the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Luke explores the etymological affinity of Roman (as in the Roman Catholic Church) and Romania, and Piotr entertains the connection

between the comic and one of the most famous sketches from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, “Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition”, which is inserted as a video. In a similar vein, Petr adds a political dimension as he presents an example of flag desecration, combining the Soviet and Greek flags. Finally, Grevin posts his Easter wish to the Orthodox members of the community and Stan expresses his amusement, along with Joseph.



Example 2. Posted on 19.9.2014

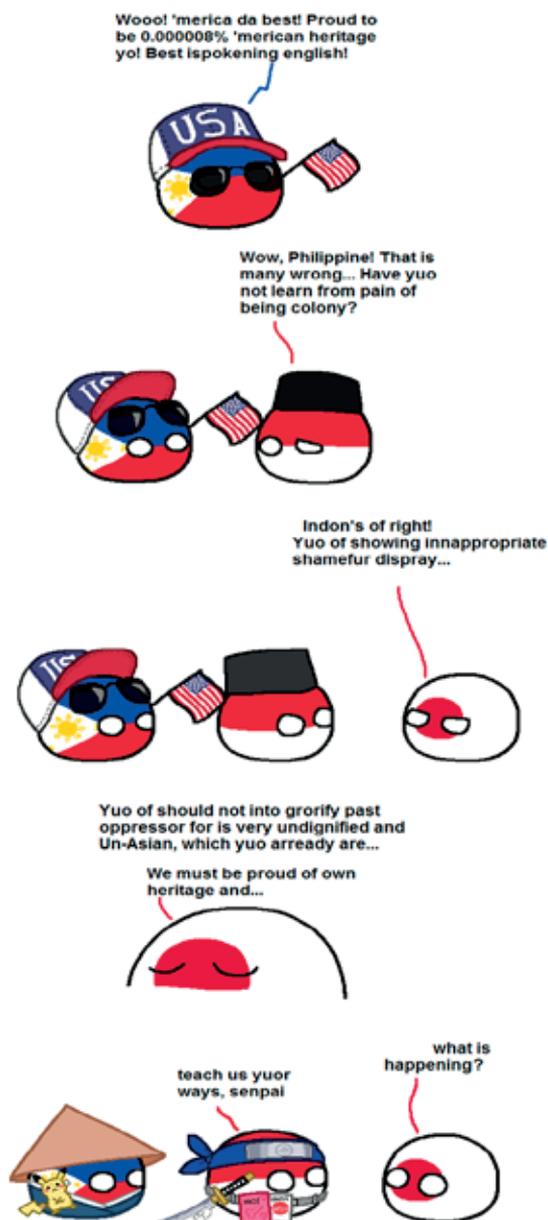
The second example presents a satirical interpretation of the Scottish independence referendum held on 18 September 2014. The referendum was meant to answer the calls for independence dating back to the 1707 Acts of Union, which are viewed by many historians as a “judicious bribery” (Ferguson 179). Following the sweeping victory of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 2011 Scottish elections, the First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, sought to honor the party’s election pledge to hold an independence referendum and initiated negotiations with the UK government which eventually resulted in the Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013. After more than 300 years, the Scottish Parliament was granted a mandate to hold a referendum, on the condition that it would be “fair, legal and decisive” (Bussey n. pag.). Voters were asked to answer either “Yes” or “No” to the question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”, whereupon the “No” side won with 2,001,926 votes over 1,617,989 for “Yes” with a total turnout of 84.6 %.



Figure 2. Selected comments on the second example.

The comment section below the second example contains mostly personal remarks about the result of the Scottish referendum and its historical context. S Mayor is the only exception, as he reminds the community of the Countryball conventions; this will be addressed in the following section. Most of the comments feature irony and sarcasm, reflecting the fact that the referendum exposed the spuriousness of the stereotypical Scottish anti-Englishness. Alastair, Abi and Alessandro capitalize on the multimodal and intertextual potential of internet memes by referring to popular movies (*Braveheart*), shows (*The Simpsons*), and other memes (*This is Why I Bomb People* – Osama Bin Laden). Other comments retain traditional textual allusions and metaphorical comparisons; for example, by setting the Scottish/English and Palestinian/Israeli relations on a par (Alex), or using the term “troll”² to express the perceived Scottish inconsistency (Can). Similarly, Ruben makes a political point by presenting a choice between “EU” and “freedom”, implying their mutual exclusiveness. The remaining extracted comments illustrate amusement (Liam), approval (Cesar), and disapproval (Jack).

Example 3 presents a ‘cultural exchange’ between Philippinesball, Indonesia-ball and Japanball. Initially, Philippinesball is being reproached by Indonesia-ball and then Japanball for its pro-American ardor; the Philippines has had an extremely strong and friendly relationship with the United States, whereas only 36% Indonesians and 37% Japanese viewed U.S. influence positively accord-



Example 3. Posted on 24.6.2014

as demonstrated by the last segment of the comic. Philippinesball suddenly wears a kimono together with a conical hat while holding Pikachu (i.e. a central charac-

ing to a 2014 BBC World Service Poll. What is more important is that some American (or Western) values contrast sharply with Asian values, particularly in terms of shame and humility.

The US cultural model emphasizes an independent self that is based on autonomy, uniqueness and individual achievement; however, in many Asian cultures, the assertion of individual desires is discouraged in favor of connectedness, social harmony, and face-saving. This means that shame in U.S. contexts is related to an internal sense of guilt and humiliation, whereas shameful events in Japanese contexts compromise the public face, such as being an object of open ridicule or rejection (Crystal et al. 122). Similarly in Indonesia, shame was also related to being “embarrassed by others’ importance” and “feeling inferior”, “stained”, or “dirty” (Tracy et al. 200). Hence the “shamefur dispray³” in celebrating the colonial past.

Lastly, the example draws on Japanese popular culture, a major new current in the global culture industry. The hallmarks of contemporary Japanese culture such as manga or anime have become tremendously popular not only throughout much of Asia (including the Philippines and Indonesia), but also in Europe and North America (Macwilliams 13). The popularity sometimes develops into Japanophilia – an excessive affection for Japanese cultural items,

ter in the Pokémon anime series); and, in a similar fashion, Indonesiaball wears a ninja forehead protector (presumably from the Naruto anime series) and carries a traditional Japanese sword (with a price tag still attached). Furthermore, Indonesiaball also carries a manga comic (Yaoi) and what seems to be a Japanese grammar book (“Learn Desu”), while using the Japanese honorific *senpai* (appropriate for older colleagues) to address Japanball in the catchphrase “teach us yuor ways, senpai” – a mangled offshoot of the “I Hope Senpai will Notice me” meme – a catchphrase expressing a desire to resolve unrequited admiration that can be frequently found in romantic anime shows and manga books.



Figure 3. Selected comments on the third example.

The comment section below the third example displays various allusions to Japanese culture and stereotypes. Firstly, the term “kawaii”; this is roughly translatable as *cute*,⁴ and it is one of the most popular Japanese xenisms – words that reflect a foreign reality and are not yet fully accommodated in the recipient language (the first stage of a loanword). They are mostly, and often incorrectly, used by weaboos⁵ in order to create a somewhat exotic effect, but the general reception is rather negative (see Dwika’s comment). The problem with appropriating *kawaii* is that it contributes to the commodification and exotification of Japanese people and culture (Koma 51), as Vincent demonstrates.

Secondly, the ‘weird stuff’. Japan is frequently perceived as a strange country from the Western perspective, mainly for its peculiar commercials, products, and

activities – just as Oliver tries to illustrate in his contribution: “BUYING FAKE BOOBS WITH YOUR MOM. A normal monday for japanese people”. Furthermore, some of the Japanese anime shows and manga comics often embrace salacious material (Hentai) ranging from ‘standard genres’, such as Yaoi (Gay; see Kamilla’s and Çağan’s comments), to rather infamously bizarre categories that feature, for example, tentacles (see Szabó’s comment).

Thirdly, the cultural values. It is evident from the discussion of the example that in Japan, shameful events might have an immensely negative impact on one’s public face. To restore lost face, people sometimes resort to a so-called ‘honor suicide’, i.e. *seppuku* (parodied by Ikhsan as “sudoku”). The description also implies that putting little emphasis on individuality leads to a strong societal value of homogenized behavior and culture. This creates “a mythology of a ‘pure’ ethnic nation” (Brody 32), which is sometimes perceived as superior (see again Vincent’s comment). The remaining comments also broach the subject of ethnic superiority; for instance, Ratchawut suggests that although Japan has finally reached a worldwide cultural significance, foreigners are still treated with contempt. Interestingly, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has been consistently voicing similar concerns regarding discrimination, racism and xenophobia in Japan since its initial report in 2001 (United Nations 2014). All of this is underlined in Val’s comment that disregards the Philippines and Indonesia as “Cultural sponges”, meaning that they soak up Japanese culture like a sponge (or a weaboo).

2.1 The linguistic perspective

A brief survey of the Countryball comics and their comments will reveal that these memes frequently and deliberately distort the standard (and politically correct) language. The linguistic deviations serve to enhance the disparaging effect by authenticating national and cultural stereotypes with regard to the particular language and culture. *POLANDBALL* and similar Facebook communities usually consist of an international audience using English as a lingua franca. This means that the English language is usually mixed with the language of the respective Countryball.

Such examples of linguistic interference can be found only sporadically, as it is rather difficult to blend the formal aspects of two languages while maintaining a certain humorous tone. Instead, Countryballs have developed their own variety, which does not significantly hinder the meaning of each utterance and sufficiently illustrates the struggles of English learners. The following subsections focus on this distinctive variety as well as providing more complex examples of specific language interference and its impact on cohesiveness.

2.1.1 The Countryball variety

In sociolinguistics, language variety represents a system of linguistic expression anchored in situational factors. Holmes argues that, in its broadest sense, the term embodies “different accents, linguistic styles, dialects and even different languages which contrast with each other for social reasons” (6); nevertheless, it is always “systematic and predictable” (Crystal 7).

Countryball comics have become a global internet phenomenon, with a wide range of popular websites or their sections dedicated to this type of internet meme. In the light of Mojdeh’s Web 2.0 classification, these websites involve not only social networking websites (e.g. *POLANDBALL* Facebook, *@polandball* on Twitter, *Polandball* on Google+), but also publicators (e.g. “Polandball” Encyclopedia Dramatica, *Polandball Wiki*, Polandball | Know Your Meme), and aggregators (e.g. *R/polandball* on Reddit, *polandballs* on 9Gag, *polandball* on Tumblr).

Having gained a massive online community base, many of its members have adopted the linguistic features manifested in Countryball comics when they relate to them, thus giving rise to a whole new variety inseparable from Countryball comics: the Countryball variety (CV). The distinctive features of the CV appear to be a conflation of grammatical insensitivity (related to the performance of English-language learners) and Netspeak – the language of internet users (cf. Crystal 2001).

Unconventional orthography is one of the dominant characteristics of Netspeak in the CV. This usually includes letter switching (e.g. *you* becomes “yuo” and *your* becomes “yuor” – third example), clipping (e.g. *Indonesia* becomes “Indon” – third example, Thomas, Çağan; *homosexual* becomes “homosex” – Thomas), abbreviating (*please* becomes “pls” – second example, Jack, Ruben; *by the way* becomes “BTW” – Grevin; *laughing out loud* becomes a variant of “lol” – Robert, Liam, Joseph), and overpunctuation (e.g. “...” – third example; “!!!” – Grevin; “?!?!” – Greg).

Some of the misspelled words are rather felicitous and allusive, for example *Germany* becomes “Germoney” (Greg), which signifies its monetary stereotypes. Scotlandball’s incessant repetition of “gib” instead of *give* (second example) invokes a childish behavior, and Philipinesball’s use of American slang words “merica”, “da”, “yo” (third example) indicates its warm relationship with America/USAball. The slang terms *’merica*, *’murica* or *’murika* also denote extreme patriotism and regularly appear in other comics and memes, especially when American stereotypes are highlighted. Here it is mainly arrogance and boastfulness that is being mimicked by Philippinesball, but other stereotypes – such as obesity, the enforcement of democracy/freedom, anti-communism, or enthusiasm for guns – appear frequently as well.

The CV can be also easily recognized by its various morphological and syntactic deviations from Standard English, such as the misuse of prepositions.

Countryballs repeatedly use the preposition *of* as a syntactic marker which performs no lexical or grammatical function and serves merely to create a notion of broken English. The preposition usually precedes the subject complement (e.g. “Indon’s of right” – third example; “Romania is of roman, why not of Roman Catholic?” – Luke), but it can occur virtually anywhere in the sentence (e.g. “You of should not into grorify past” – third example). Another widely misused preposition appears in the generic catchphrase *X can/cannot into Y* (e.g. “Indon can into YAOI” – Çağan) which has most likely been adopted from LOLspeak.⁶ Despite the fact that CV allows the preposition *into* also in constructions other than the original pattern, it almost always lacks a prepositional verb (e.g. “im offended by this pls into removal” – Jack; “Yuo of should not into grorify past” – third example).

Besides the misused prepositions, the CV displays several other linguistic lapses such as incorrect quantifiers (e.g. “many wrong” – third example), inappropriate negative prefixes (“un-Asian” – third example; “unshamefur dispray” – Vincent) and an assortment of grammatical omissions, including plural suffixes (e.g. “OK, valued employee[s]!” – first example; “Philippine[s]” – third example), articles (e.g. “Ve need [a] solution” – first example; have yuo not learn from [the] pain of being [a] colony?” – third example), subjects (e.g. “for [it] is very undignified” – third example; “indon [is] secretly of homosex, [it] is of haram” – Thomas), and linking verbs (e.g. “merica [is] da best!” – third example; “indon [is] secretly of homosex” – Thomas).

2.1.2 Linguistic interference

Non-English-speaking Countryballs often use specifically corrupted forms of English arising from the negative language transfer caused by applying knowledge from one language to another language. In other words; phonological, lexical and grammatical features of a non-English speaker’s native language are grafted onto English. Countryballs often deliberately exaggerate this interference to render the stereotypes more authentic.

The first example illustrates linguistic interference between English and German (Denglish). Phonetically, one of the most noticeable markers of a German accent is the labiovelar approximant /w/ being substituted for the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ since the phoneme /w/ does not occur in German, hence the misspelled pronoun *we* in “Ve need”. Another substitution occurs in the last sentence “Kan you handle it?” where the letter *c* in the modal verb *can* is replaced by the letter *k*. The substitution is most likely motivated by the German modal equivalent *können* (i.e. *kannst* in the conjugated form). By the same token, the English copula verb is replaced by German “ist” in the verb phrase “ist not working” (see also Greg’s comment).

Grammatically, the sentence “Ve need solution it is unorthodox” marks a syntactic interference, in terms of relative pronouns. One of the closest German equivalents *Wir brauchen [eine] Lösung, die unortodox ist* shows that German relative pronouns are declined and reflect the gender and number of their antecedent while the case marks their grammatical function in the relative clause; *die* signals the feminine gender and singular form of *Lösung* (solution) as well as the nominative case. In contrast, declension and grammatical gender are virtually non-existent in modern English; therefore, the epicene pronoun “it” was probably chosen as seemingly the closest substitution. It can be also noted that the sentence refrains from transferring the syntactic arrangement of a German relative clause, which places the verb in the final position. This is largely incompatible with English SVO word order and its transfer would most likely diminish the humorous tone by increasing the cognitive effort to decipher the utterance.

The sentence “Ve need to think outside auf der box” marks a lexical interference motivated by the idiomatic expression *to think outside of the box*, in addition to the lexico-phonetic similarities between the onset diphthongs /ou/ (English *out*) and /au/ (German *aus*). The pre-modifier *valued* in the vocative “valued employee” suggests lexico-semantic interference possibly originating from the German collocation *Sehr geehrte* used in formal salutations, such as *Sehr geehrte Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter* (much honored female employees/co-workers and male employees/co-workers). The German collocation signals social distance through respect and reverence, whereas the common English equivalent (*dear employees*) signals solidarity through affability and cordiality, even in formal contexts. However, transplanting the literal meaning into “valued employee” conveys quite the opposite – an ironically disparaging tone that underlines the stereotypical notion of German superiority and cold pragmatism in the comics.

The third example contains discernable phonological interference between English and Japanese (Engrish/Japglish). Both languages have different phonotactic constraints, especially in the light of the mora-based nature of Japanese and syllable-based nature of English. This means that Japanese native speakers often resort to epenthesis (adding sounds) in order to make English consonant clusters more compatible with Japanese phonotactics, as the most common Japanese moraic form is CV and consonant clusters are largely not permitted in any syllable/word position (Martz 40). As a result, an epenthetic vowel frequently inserted to remove non-permitted codas in loanwords: [d] and [t] are followed by [o], and [w] follows elsewhere; so, for example, *fight* becomes ‘faio’ and *festival* becomes ‘fesutibaru’ (Hall 1589, emphasis added). Vincent attempts to follow this pattern by adding an epenthetic vowel to the word *life*, changing it into “laifu”.

Even more discernable is the lallation caused by imperfect enunciation of the alveolar lateral approximant /l/ which sounds like the postalveolar approximant /r/, such as in ‘fesutibaru’. While English distinguishes between the two phonemes,

Japanese has only one liquid consonant that is generally realized as an apico-alveolar flap [r], yet its exact pronunciation differs in social and regional variants. This means that Japanese native speakers often mispronounce words like “arready”, “grorify” or “shamefur dispray”, because they do not naturally perceive the difference between the two sounds. Interestingly, this tendency is frequently accentuated in movies and anime shows – antagonists are sometimes easily recognized by the short and long apical trills [r] and [r:], which are characteristic of the socially marked variants spoken by the street thugs and yakuza in Tokyo (Labrune 92).

Lastly, Indonesiaball uses a Japanese honorific in addressing Japanball as “Senpai”, which signals lexical interference. Japanese honorifics reflect the configuration of the discourse participants, namely the attitude and relationship of the addresser to the subject matter or addressee. Although morphologically realized as a suffix (e.g. “Nihon-senpai” Vincent), Senpai can be used as a deferential stand-alone title; nonetheless, its transfer from Japanese into English makes it a xenism similar to kawaii.

2.1.3 Summary

This section has shed some light on the linguistic conventions of the *POLANDBALL* community on Facebook. The language within this community exhibits a number of recurrent properties in accordance with its disparaging ideology, grounded in stereotypes. From the linguistic point of view, these properties involve disparaging solecisms driven by overt linguistic stereotyping, which is mainly inspired by some well-known challenges for learners of English and by the different linguistic backgrounds of each Countryball. Intriguingly, the second example deviates from this pattern by employing the graphematic features of CV in spite of featuring only Scotlandball and UKball, which are both considered English-speaking Countryballs and therefore “shouldn’t talk in broken English”, as S Mayor claims in the second example. This suggests that the members of the community are aware of the distinctive linguistic conventions and consciously attempt to maintain them. The next section addresses this rectifying mechanism, as well as exploring less overt elements of cohesion.

2.2 The social perspective

The excerpted comments indicate that the community members co-create the content of the community according to the tenets of the community’s ideology of disparagement, and, by means of humor, strengthen the community’s cohesion. The specific means of achieving and enhancing cohesion will be discussed from the social viewpoint in this section.

This study draws on Martineau's seminal 'Model of Social Functions of Humour' (1972), which outlines a group-based theoretical model of the functions of humor. Focusing on the variables that determine these social actions, Martineau distinguishes: the actor (the initiator of the humor), the audience or recipient (the butt of the humor), the judgment of the humor (esteeming or disparaging), the cultural context, and the social position of the involved parties (114). Martineau also identifies three group settings as a basic framework for the distribution of humor: intragroup situations, intergroup situations, and intergroup interactions – as illustrated below.

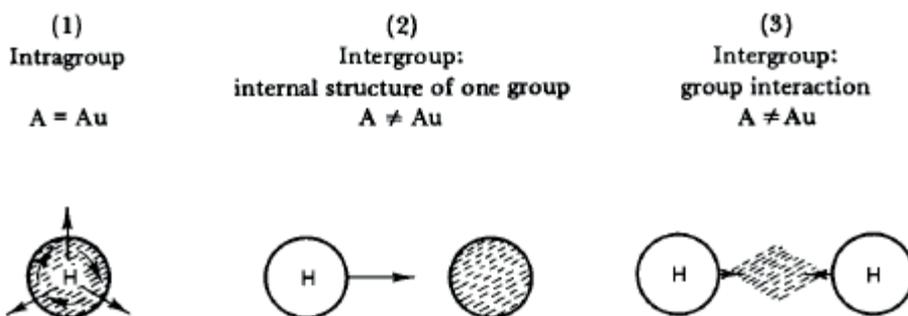


Figure 4. Martineau's diagram of the humor process in the three structural situations with the first variables – the actor (A) and the audience (Au); each circle represents a social group where H stands for the source of humor and arrows indicate the direction of flow of the humor. The shaded area is the focus of analysis in each situation (115).

The analysis is primarily focused on the intragroup situation, with the *POLANDBALL* community being the focal point of the analysis; the two remaining situations could be considered in analyzing the relations with/among other Facebook communities devoted to Countryball comics. Adopting the model to the study of internet memes, Countryball comics in particular, it is necessary to consider the inward-looking nature of intragroup humor which is being exchanged solely within the ingroup, and therefore can have either the ingroup or the outgroup as its target. In this study, the 'ingroup' comprises members and proponents of the humorous ideology embraced by the *POLANDBALL* community (i.e. community administrator(s) posting the memes in the community, but not necessarily their author(s), contributors in the comment section, and regular non-contributing members). The 'outgroup' includes generally non-members inclining towards the principles of diplomatic language and political correctness in such contexts (i.e. possibly Joseph's acquaintance in the first example and seemingly Jack in the second example).

Martineau's model will be integrated with the Social Identity Approach, which covers a broad framework of more specific theories – primarily Social Identi-

ty Theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner 2004) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner et. al 1987). The following subsections will employ both SIT and SCT to explain the cohesive workings of the community from the social point of view. The SIT-based analysis touches on the intergroup relations and indicates that the *POLANDBALL* community consolidates cohesion by maintaining a sense of positive distinctiveness (representing a countermovement to political correctness). The SCT-based analysis then examines the intragroup relations and describes the cohesive mechanisms based on stereotyping and self-categorization in the reactions to Countryball memes.

2.2.1 Social Identity Theory

According to Thomae and Pina, “Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that a person’s identity exists on a continuum between personal identity and social identity. The latter is based on social group membership (e.g., sex, race, profession, sports team). The salience of this social identity depends on context and can lead to behaviour disadvantaging outgroup members.” Since the group membership applies here solely to the *POLANDBALL* community, the salience is determined by Countryball memes, whose content appears to completely disregard the notions of diplomacy and political correctness (PC) through their proclivity for disparaging the outgroup.

There is an extensive body of literature on diplomatic language (DL) (cf. Rommetveit, 1974; Kurbalija and Slavik, 2001). Burhanudeen subsumes its basic principles under several points (38):

- (i) Emphasize ‘what to say’ constructively. Avoid ‘what not to say;’
- (ii) Think of the language you use as a peace-building, peace-making, peace-promoting force;
- (iii) Learn to identify and to avoid potentially aggressive, insensitive, offensive, destructive uses of language;
- (iv) Communicate both tactfully and tactically; and
- (v) Adopt a constructive perspective, for expressing your attitudes, beliefs, and emotions. (qtd. in Matos 283–285)

It can be argued that that PC constitutes a more radical and prescriptive derivative of DL, which has spread into “numerous agendas, reforms, and issues concerning race, culture, gender, disability, the environment, and animal rights. [...] As a result of these transitions it has become a misnomer, being concerned with neither politics nor correctness” (Hughes 3). Although PC originally asserted itself as essentially an idealistic and moderate attempt to sanitize language in order to improve social relations, the term has recently gained negative connotations since it has become a subject for parody of egregious policies that pursue various linguistic interventions aimed at protecting particular groups of people (usually minorities) from offensive speech and social discrimination – in other words, from

disparagement. Such exaggerations are sometimes sources of humor, for example the transformed title of a well-known fairy-tale, *Melanin Impoverished and the Seven Vertically Challenged Individuals* (Holmes 340).

Countryball memes go in the opposite direction, as they defy the very core of PC through their morally and ethically disputable nature. The focus is therefore laid particularly on disparagement-based humor, defined as “remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target” (Ferguson and Ford 283). Ferguson and Ford review the literature on disparagement humor particularly with respect to Social Identity Theory, and they suggest a theoretical model according to which people initiate this type of humor in response to a threat to personal or social identity as a means of bolstering or maintaining positive distinctiveness, and consequently, amusement (298):

**IDENTITY THREAT → DISPARAGEMENT HUMOR
→ POSITIVE DISTINCTIVENESS → AMUSEMENT**

This paper suggests that PC, as a prescriptive derivate of DL, poses an identity threat due to the fact that it has had a considerable degree of influence on what is regarded as ‘acceptable’ or ‘appropriate’ in linguistic and social behavior. Countryball memes directly flout the regulations imposed by PC and DL, and by doing so, the community maintains its positive distinctiveness.

This is well instanced in the stark contrast between Merkel’s statement and its possible interpretation in the first example. While Merkel conforms to the austere language of diplomacy, the comic renders her statement in a distorted language that signals German identity (flouting the first and fourth principle) and in a far more dictatorial and bold manner (flouting the second, third, and fifth principle) – which is, needless to say, hardly acceptable in such a situation. The remaining examples flout the principles in a similar manner due to the inherently satirical qualities of the comics.

Looking at the excerpted comments, there seems to be virtually no desire to uphold DL or PC (except for Joseph’s acquaintance from the first example, who can be thus considered a representative of the outgroup). It might be argued that Jack from the second example opposes the disparaging ideology, as he allegedly feels offended and wants the comic “into removal”; however, his use of the Countryball variety (CV) neuters his request and marks his affiliation with the community. In any case, his request is quickly denied and ridiculed by another member of the community (Robert). In the same vein, S Mayor criticizes the divergence from the CV in the same example, and Kamilla corrects Thomas in the third example. This can be seen as a rectification mechanism enacted by certain community members in order to maintain consistency in disparaging the outgroup exactly after the fashion of the Countryball variety, thereby effectively securing positive distinctiveness and enhancing ingroup cohesion.

The comment sections below each example show that the positive distinctiveness is maintained mainly by contributions that are consistent with the community's ideology, which is rooted in disparagement humor. Highly inconsistent, irrelevant or opposing contributions are likely to be pointed out and/or ridiculed by the 'community enforcers'. Such practices shift personal identity towards social identity – the individual self gradually identifies with the collective self, which ultimately strengthens the communal homogeneity in a manner described by Self-Categorization Theory (see the next section).

2.2.2 Self-Categorization Theory

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) postulates that “people tend to maximise differences between categories and minimise differences within categories (meta-contrast principle). Furthermore, category (or group) members will perceive themselves less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype” (Thomae and Pina 5). This process is generally known as depersonalization.

From the SCT perspective, Countryball memes subscribe to disparagement humor as an ingroup norm that facilitates depersonalization by outgroup stereotyping, thus enhancing ingroup cohesion. The excerpted comments are sufficiently illustrative; none of them pose a challenge to the disparagement-laden ideology of the community. On the contrary: the contributions usually encourage the ideas introduced by the respective comics on the basis of the personal associations that perpetuate various stereotypes within the confines of the community's ideology. By reinforcing and augmenting the stereotypes, the community members identify with its ideology and adhere to its norms. This means that community members may be cognitively assimilated to the ingroup prototype, thus becoming interchangeable to a certain extent. For instance, Greg's comment in the first example: “Germoney ‘ist not working’?!?! Das ist impossible” is almost non-distinguishable from the original comic; not only does it adhere to the assumed stereotypes, it also follows the same pattern of language interference; just as Vincent's comment does in the third example: “Japan's just terring wolrd that they should show unshamefur dispray and submit to Nihon-Senpai for Nihon is the kawaii, the moe, the laifu desu.”

Stereotypes are also conceived and perpetuated in a more subtle way, through framing. It is argued that people use cognitive shortcuts called schemata (frameworks) drawing on stereotypes to help make sense of the world around them (Goffman 1974). In other words, both communicator and audience rely on certain schemata to produce and process information; and, as a result, “content producers craft media frames, which may in turn influence audience frames via frame setting and ultimately shape attitudes, attributions and behaviors” (Parrott 20). This is instanced in Oliver's contribution in the third example, which stereotypes Japanese

culture as outlandish. Considering that “frames are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman 52), the second sentence in Oliver’s contribution “BUYING FAKE BOOBS WITH YOUR MOM / **A normal monday for japanese people**” reinforces the stereotypical weirdness and prurience that is suggested in the visual content of the example.

Disparagement humor frequently relies on stereotyped images and stock phrases due to the fact that this allows “the listener to resolve the incongruity and ‘get the joke’” (Martin 139). For example, Lukasz’s contribution in the first example addresses the religious dimension of the first example by showing Darth Vader – a despotic fictional character from the Star Wars franchise – in Patriarch Alexy II’s attire. The outgroup values (i.e. the sanctity of the Church) are disparaged by being set on par with a piece of popular culture; the humor stems from combining two incongruent ideas – the Dark Lord of the Sith and the Patriarch of an Orthodox Church.

It should be borne in mind that self-categorization or depersonalization does not always occur. For example, Grevin’s comment “BTW merry Easter, orthodox Bros!!!” does not carry any subtext of disparagement, and yet it does not contest the ideology. The informal features of Netspeak steer the message away from the principles of DL and PC. It is also possible to express personal observations or remarks without stereotyping or following the linguistic patterns of Countryball memes (e.g. Davi in the second example or Joseph in the first example). In such cases the cohesion is sustained mainly by relevance, which is typical of discussions in the comment sections. Any contribution can spark a debate via the ‘reply’ button provided by Facebook interface. This is unfortunately illustrated only partially (e.g. by Liam and Cesar in the second example), because the strings of replies usually stretch beyond the spatial constraints of the analysis presented in this paper.

The analysis of comments shows that the community’s predilection for disparagement tips the balance in favor of a social identity, thus increasing the ingroup’s homogeneity in line with the SCT. Nonetheless, self-categorization in the comments is less prevalent than in the comics themselves; only a minority of the contributions adhere to antecedent stereotypes as well as to the pattern of language interference (full self-categorization). In fact, most of the contributions use the Countryball variety instead of a particular form of interference when referring to the original comics or preceding comments. Even in the absence of CV features, an undertone of disparagement (or the approval of disparagement) are largely present (partial self-categorization). Contributions that are devoid of disparaging content and linguistic deviations marking the CV (zero self-categorization) usually still possess some degree of relevance. This suggests that the cohesive force in the *POLANDBALL* community combines adherence

with relevance to the memetic content in terms of their communal ideology and conventions.

2.2.3 Summary

This section has discussed the cohesive function of disparagement humor initiated by Countryball memes within the *POLANDBALL* community in the framework of the Social Identity Approach, which draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). SIT describes how the community members identify with the disparagement humor in order to distinguish the community from the politically correct alternatives, while also displaying a considerable self-sustaining tendency to rectify any breach of its purported conventions, which contributes considerably to its homogeneity and cohesion. SCT enables us to examine the process of identification on the basis of stereotyping, exploring its consequences for cohesiveness of the community. It appears that the homogeneity is not maintained only by its distinct linguistic properties, but also by its propensity to reject any notion of political correctness by stereotyping, which is evident in the comment sections. Community members who actively participate in the comment section display a certain degree of adherence to its conventions and/or relevance to the preceding content. This to some extent presupposes an affiliation with the community's disparaging ideology.

From the social point of view, the cohesive function of disparagement humor is maintained by its inclusive nature (strengthening the ingroup) as well as its exclusive nature (disparaging the outgroup). In other words, communities such as *POLANDBALL* help to forge unlikely social bonds due to the multimodal and inclusive environment of Facebook, which unites people in different geographical locations and hierarchical positions while creating a sense of shared 'conspiracy' in the illicit context of Countryball memes. On the other hand, people or contributions that do not approve of the community's ideology are derided, and contributions flouting its conventions are likely to be corrected or ridiculed.

3. Concluding remarks and future directions

This paper presents Countryball memes as an antithesis to political correctness. The memes provide a unique platform for expressing one's views on international relations and events attracting global attention, yet the means of expression used on this platform should conform to its idiosyncratic conventions – which are rooted in prejudicial attitudes revolving around national and cultural stereotypes. This manner of expression also exploits Facebook's multimodal interface, allowing its users to employ text concurrently with a picture or video, commenting on any Facebook

post (provided that the comment section is open). The table below illustrates the exact numbers for each example, including the non-excerpted comments.

	Text	Picture	Video	Text + Pic./ Vid.
First example	9	14	1	3/0
Second example	42	12	1	6/2
Third example	31	14	0	8/0

Table 1. Multimodal composition of each example's comment section, gathered in July 2015.

Except for the first example, the first table indicates a notable dominance of solely textual contributions. Contributions that combine textual and pictorial elements occur only sporadically. Contributions containing a video are extremely rare, and they are statistically insignificant in the analyzed examples. This suggests a tendency towards traditional modes of communication relying on purely textual features, yet the number of examples is insufficient and further research is required for a conclusive survey of the compositional preferences.

The first table also reveals other aspects of cohesiveness, as contributing in the comment section represents only one part of the cohesive power holding the community together. Community members also relate to the Countryball memes by liking or sharing the memes outside the community. Surprisingly, passive participation (i.e. tacit consent) seems to be the strongest cohesive element; the community seems to be constantly growing, and new content is regularly added in spite of the fact that the number of contributions in the comment sections remains low in comparison:

	Likes	Shares	Comments
First example	986	42	27
Second example	4,327	649	63
Third example	734	61	53

Table 2. Relational aspects of each example, gathered in July 2015.

The second table shows that the vast majority of people relate to the comics without active participation in terms of contributing and co-creating its content. Instead, they share and 'like' the content published in the community, expanding its reach by virtue of the networked environment on Facebook. A user's activities (such as commenting, liking and sharing) might be tracked in his or her profile, depending on the privacy setting. Moreover, these activities can appear in the news

feed of the whole network of an individual's friends, and those friends will be notified of his or her involvement in the *POLANDBALL* community – so they might become acquainted with it and eventually join it.

As was previously stated, the conclusions presented in this paper remain indicative rather than representative due to the small size of the corpus; furthermore, being limited only to one Countryball community on Facebook, this paper also lacks a broader insight into the Countryball phenomenon not only on Facebook, but also on other SNSs and participatory platforms such as blogs, forums, or imageboards. Nevertheless, the approach introduced in this paper might be utilized in future research exploring different platforms in order to draw more conclusive results. Incorporated in the Social Identity Approach, Martineau's model (1972) might be easily adjusted for the study of intergroup mechanisms of humor. This would facilitate a comparison of the multimodal composition and relational aspects of the Countryball memes published in different communities across different platforms, such as *@polandball* on Twitter and *r/polandball* on Reddit. The same strategy might be used in comparing, for example, *Germanyball/Greeceball* communities regarding the Greek debt crisis or other subjects of public attention.

Additional research might be also fruitful in comparing the ideologies and linguistic conventions of different Countryball communities in terms of adhering to their ideologies and enforcing their conventions, which might lend some insight into the cohesive mechanics of virtual communities in general. Finally, the research might be also extended to other types of internet memes, which could significantly broaden our knowledge about the dynamics of memetic communication and its social ramifications.

Notes

¹ Facebook Reports Third Quarter 2014.

² In internet discourse, trolling refers to extraneous contributions or activities aimed at disrupting normal on-topic discussion or provoking other participants into an emotional response. The term also frequently appears in online games. Trolls are players who intentionally sabotage the game or harass other players. Trolling generally qualifies as breaking the code of conduct and can be penalized if reported. Can's comment "Report scotland for troll" is a good (yet displaced) example of this regulatory procedure.

³ A catchphrase from the 2011 strategy videogame *Total War: Shogun 2*. It is said by the virtual advisor when any of the units routs, and "since the probability of at least one unit routing every battle was extremely high, players were very likely to hear this phrase at least once every battle and the announcer's heavy Japanese accent was found to be hilarious." (Know Your meme n. pag.).

⁴ Translating the term *Kawai* simply as “cute” is rather problematic, because its signification varies: “[i] The term kawaii designates the esthetic which appreciates the immature or the childish. [ii] The term kawaii describes the decorative taste, which is one of the two principal esthetics in Japan, the other being minimalism, which is its opposite. [iii] Kawaii could be based on the miniature. [iv] Kawaii is a value associated with girls, who are considered to be weak in a macho society. If the term were used to qualify any object without distinction, the well-defined hierarchies would be subverted. [v] Kawaii is symbolically constructed by the culture of Japanese mass consumption. The fashion kawaii could not exist if it were not consumed” (Koma 52).

⁵ Originally ‘Wannabe Japanese’, an English slang term “used to describe a person (typically of non-Asian descent) who prefers Japan and all things in Japanese over one’s indigenous culture” (Know Your Meme n. pag.).

⁶ Another sub-variety of Netspeak originating from the LOLcats memes.

Bibliography

- Bauckhage, Christian. *Insights into Internet Memes*. Rep. Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, 17–21 Dec. 2011. Web. 5. Nov. 2015.
- Boulos, N. and Wheeler, S. “The emerging Web 2.0 social software: an enabling suite of sociable technologies in health and healthcare education.” *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 24 (2007): 2–23. Print.
- boyd, danah. “Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life.” *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*. Ed. David Buckingham. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. Print.
- Brody, Betsy. *Opening the Door: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Globalization in Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Kushin, Matthew, & Kelin Kitchener. “Getting political on social network sites: Exploring online political discourse on Facebook.” *First Monday* 14.11 (2009). Web. 6 Jan. 2014.
- Burhanudeen, Hafriza. “Diplomatic Language: An Insight from Speeches Used in International Diplomacy.” *Akademika* 67 (2006): 37–51. Print.
- Bussey, Katrine. “Warning over Legality of Scottish Referendum.” *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 16 Jan. 2012. Web. 08 Aug. 2015.
- Charnigo, L., & Barnett-Ellis, P. “Checking out Facebook.com: the impact of a digital trend on academic libraries.” *Information technology and libraries* 26.1 (2013): 23–34. Print.
- Cheung, C. M., Chiu, P. Y., & Lee, M. K. “Online social networks: Why do students use facebook?” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27.4 (2011): 1337–43. Print.

- Crystal, David S., et al. "Examining Relations between Shame and Personality among University Students in The United States and Japan: A Developmental Perspective." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 25.2 (2001): 113–23. Print.
- Davidson, Patrick. "The Language of Internet Memes." *The Social Media Reader*. Ed. Michael Mandiberg. New York: New York UP, 2012. 120–34. Print.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Díaz, Carlos M. C. "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme." *Revista CES Psicología* 6.2 (2013): 82–104. Print.
- Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm". *Journal of Communication* 43.4 (1993): 51–58. Print.
- Facebook. "About". *Facebook*. n.d. Web 5. Nov. 2015.
- Facebook Help Centre. "How News Feed Works." *Facebook*, n.d. Web. 13 June 2015. ---. „Like”. *Facebook*, n.d. Web. 13 June 2015.
- Ferguson, Mark A & Thomas E. Ford. "Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 21.3 (2008): 283–312. Print.
- Ferguson, William. *Scotland's Relations with England: A Survey to 1707*. Edinburgh: Donald, 1977. Print.
- Gillmor, Dan. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2004. Print.
- Goffman, E. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass, 1974. Print.
- Hall, Nancy. "Vowel Epenthesis." *The Blackwell Companion to Phonology*. Ed. Marc Van Oostendorp. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 1576–596. Print.
- Hogan, Bernie & Anabel Quan-Haase. "Persistence and change in social media: A framework of social practice." *Bulletin of Science, Technology and society* 30 (2010): 309–15. Print.
- Holmes, Janet. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman, 1992. Print.
- Hughes, Geoffrey. *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture*. Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Print.
- Jantke, Klaus et. al. "Memetic Communication Media – Concepts, Technologies, Applications" *2012 IEEE International Conference on Multimedia and Expo Workshops* (2012): 260–65. Print.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009. Print.
- Karpova, Elena, Ana-Paula Correia, and Evrim Baran. "Learn to Use and Use to Learn: Technology in Virtual Collaboration Experience." *Internet and Higher Education* 12 (2009): 45-52. Print.
- Kaupilla, O. P., R. Rajala, and A. Jyrama. "Knowledge Sharing through Virtual Teams across Borders and Boundaries." *Management Learning* 42.4 (2011): 395–418. Print.

- Koma, Kyoko. "Stereotypes and Foreign Words: The Term Kawaii in French National Newspapers (1999-2009)." *Japan as Images: Crossing Viewpoints of Europe and Japan*. Ed. Ineta Dabašinskienė. Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus U, 2010. 51–64. Print.
- Kostantineas, Harry, and George Vlachos. "Internet Memes: Humour in Post-modernism and Encroachment upon the Mainstream." *Visions of Humanity in Cyberculture*. Inter-Disciplinary.Net, 2 July 2012. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.
- Know Your Meme. "Shamefur Dispray." *Cheezburger, Inc.* Web. 2 June 2015 ---. "Weeaboo." *Cheezburger, Inc.* Web. 2 June 2015.
- Kurbalija, Jovan, and Hannah Slavik. *Language and Diplomacy*. Msida, Malta: DiploProjects, Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, U of Malta, 2001. Print.
- Labruno, Laurence. *The Phonology of Japanese*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.
- Macwilliams, Mark W. *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008. Print.
- Martin, R.A. *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press 2007. Print
- Martineau, William H. "A model of the social functions of humor." In Jeffrey H. Goldstein & Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*. New York, NY, USA: Academic Press, 1972. 101–25. Print.
- Martz, Chris D. *Production of Onset Consonant Clusters/sequences by Adult Japanese Learners*. Diss. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2007. Print.
- Matos, Francisco Gomez. "Applying the Pedagogy of Positiveness to Diplomatic Communication." *Language and Diplomacy*. Eds. Jovan Kurbalija and Hannah Slavik. Msida, Malta: DiploProjects, Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, U of Malta, 2001. 281–87. Print.
- Milner, Ryan M. "Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement." *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357–390. Print.
- Moffat, Alistair, and Adrian Mclean. "Merger as Conversation." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 31.6 (2010): 534–50. Print.
- Mojdeh, Sana. *Understanding Knowledge Sharing In Web 2.0 Online Communities: A Socio-Technical Study*. Thesis. McMaster U, 2014. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster U, 2014. *MacSphere*. Web. 21 Jan. 2015.
- Oboler, Andre. *Aboriginal Memes and Online Hate*. Rep. no. IR12-2. Melbourne: Online Hate Prevention Institute, 2012. Print.
- O'Reilly, Tim. "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." *COMMUNICATIONS & STRATEGIES* 1 (2007): 17–37. Print.
- Parrott, Scott. *An Examination of the Use of Disparagement Humor in Online TV Comedy Clips and the Role of Audience Reaction in its Effects*. Diss. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina 2013. Print.

- Peppler, Kylie A., and Maria Solomou. "Building Creativity: Collaborative Learning and Creativity in Social Media Environments." *On the Horizon* 19.1 (2011): 13–23. Print.
- Phillips, Whitney M. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: The Origins, Evolution, and Cultural Embeddedness of Online Trolling*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Oregon, 2012. Print.
- POLANDBALL. "About." *Facebook*. n.d. Web. 2 June 2015.
- PRC. "European Unity on the Rocks - Greeks and Germans at Polar Opposites." *Pew Research Center*. 12 May 2012. Web. 24 July 2015.
- Preece, Jenny. *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability*. New York: John Wiley, 2000. Print.
- Rintel, Sean. "Crisis Memes: The Importance of Templatability to Internet Culture and Freedom of Expression." *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 2.2 (2013): 253–71. Print.
- Rommetveit, Ragnar. *On Message Structure; a Framework for the Study of Language and Communication*. London: Wiley, 1974. Print.
- Shifman, Limor and Mike Thelwall. "Assessing global diffusion with Web memetics: The spread and evolution of a popular joke." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60.12 (2009): 2567–76. Print.
- Shifman, Limor. *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 2013. Print.
- Smith, Helena. "Greek Welcome for Angela Merkel While Protesters Are Held at Bay." *The Guardian*. [Theguardian.com/uk](http://theguardian.com/uk), 11 Apr. 2014. Web. 11 July 2015.
- Tajfel, Henry & John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In John T. Jost & Jim Sidanius (eds.). *Political Psychology: Key Readings*. New York, NY, USA: Psychology Press 2004. 276–93. Print.
- Tajfel, Henry, Michael G. Billig, R.P. Bundy & Claude Flament. Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1.2 (1971): 149–78. Print
- Tracy, Jessica L. et. al. *The Self-conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*. New York: Guilford, 2007. Print.
- Tredinnick, L. "Web 2.0 and business: A pointer to the intranets of the future" *Business Information Review* 23.4 (2006): 228–34. Print.
- United Nations. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. „Concluding observations on the combined seventh to ninth periodic reports of Japan." *The U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination CERD/C/JNP/CO/7-9* (2014). Web. 5. July 2015.
- Wiggins, Bradley E., and Bret G. Bowers. „Memes as Genre: A Structural Analysis of the Memescape." *New Media & Society* (2014): 1–21. Sagepublications.com, 26 May 2014. Web. 5 July 2015.
- Wilshusen, G. C. *Challenges in federal agencies' use of Web 2.0 technologies*. Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office, 2010. Print.

Zajicek, Mary. "Web 2.0: Hype or Happiness?" *Proceedings of the 2007 International Cross-Disciplinary Conference on Web Accessibility (W4A) 2007, Banff, Canada, May 07-08, 2007*. Eds. Yeliz Yesilada and Simon Harper. New York: ACM, 2007. 35–39. Print.

Address:

University of Ostrava

Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

Reální 5

701 03 Ostrava

Czech Republic

on.prochazka@gmail.com