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From Humour to Identity: The Role of English Memes in Language and Identity Expression among Algerian EFL Students

من الفكاهة إلى الهوية: دور الميمات الإنجليزية في التعبير اللغوي والهوية لدى
طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في الجزائر

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the role of English memes in influencing Algerian EFL students' linguistic practices and identity expression. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed method approach, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to EFL 80 Master 1 students of linguistics at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret to investigate their perceptions of memes' impact on their linguistic behaviours and identity expression, followed by an online observation to contextualise and capture real-time engagement with memes. The findings revealed that memes influence linguistic behaviours through code-switching and lexical borrowing while serving as strategies for expressing cultural belonging and affective stances.

Keywords: Algerian EFL students; digital communication; English memes; language choice; identity expression

ملخص البحث

تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور الميمات الإنجليزية في تأثيرها على الممارسات اللغوية والتعبير عن الهوية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في الجزائر. تم اعتماد منهج مختلط يغلب عليه الطابع النوعي، حيث تم استخدام استبيان مفتوح الأسئلة أُجري على 80 طالبًا في السنة الأولى ماستر في اللسانيات بجامعة ابن خلدون تيارت لاستقصاء تصوراتهم حول تأثير الميمات على سلوكهم اللغوي وتعبيرهم عن الهوية، تلاه إجراء مراقبة عبر الإنترنت لتوثيق التفاعل اللحظي مع الميمات. كشفت النتائج أن الميمات تؤثر على السلوكيات اللغوية من خلال التناوب اللغوي والاقتران المعجمي، كما تعمل كاستراتيجيات للتعبير عن الانتماء الثقافي والمواقف العاطفية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في الجزائر؛ التواصل الرقمي؛ الميمات الإنجليزية؛ اختيار اللغة؛ التعبير عن الهوية

1. Introduction

In the digital era, online platforms have become central arenas for social and cultural interaction. Within these spaces, the rapid dissemination of memes, often characterized by succinct textual and visual elements, has emerged as a salient mode of digital communication. Notably, memes provide internet users with social spaces to convey social commentary and cultural expression through humour. Youth, as the most digitally engaged and adaptable demographic, employ memes not merely for entertainment but also as vehicles for self-expression, social alignment, and a social belonging. Hence, memes can be approached and studied as discursive strategies for language and cultural identity, as they allow individuals to negotiate their social selves, express their cultural values, and participate in shared meaning-making practices within digital communities.

While a growing body of research has examined memes in global contexts, little to no attention has been directed to their role in influencing linguistic and cultural identity within the Algerian setting. This research direction was motivated by a preliminary observation that Algerian EFL students notably employ meme-derived expressions, such as “POV”, “fact”, and “sheesh”, within classroom interactions. Such instances position the significance of memes as communicative resources that extend beyond digital spaces, thereby warranting closer investigation of their impact on students’ language practices and identity expression. To address this gap, the study examines the role of memes in influencing Algerian EFL learners’ linguistic behaviours and identity performance. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-method approach, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to EFL Master 1 students of linguistics at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret to investigate their perceptions of the potential impact of memes on their language choice and identity expression. Complementing this, and given the multimodal nature of memes, an online observation was conducted to contextualise the study and provide a systematic analysis of students’ publicly shared meme posts on Facebook. Against this backdrop, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do English memes influence students’ linguistic practices?
- How do they contribute to students’ identity expression?

Based on the research questions, the formulated hypotheses are as follows

- Memes can significantly influence students’ linguistic practices, particularly through phenomena such as code-switching, lexical borrowing, and informal expressions.
- Memes can contribute to students’ identity expression by allowing them to signal group belonging, social alignment, cultural expression, and affective stance.

2. Language, Culture, and Identity

The social symbolic weight of language has long served as a means of communication, allowing individuals to transmit their thoughts and shared sociocultural values across diverse contexts (Hamidi & Belkaid, 2023). Historically, early linguistic paradigms, particularly structuralism and generative grammar, conceptualised language from an autonomous and cognitive lens. Structuralists conceptualised language from a self-contained structural system, detached from its social functions (de Saussure, 1916), while generativists framed it as an innate capacity governed by a universal grammar and internalised rules (Chomsky, 2006). However, such approaches have notably neglected the social dimensions of language, a gap that

sociolinguists have addressed to highlight the role of language in reflecting social variation and function (Labov, 1972 & Hymes, 1974). Beyond its communicative function, language serves as a medium of expressing identity, social belonging, and culturally embedded meaning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). That is to say, “language is intrinsically related to culture. It performs the social function of communication of the group values, beliefs and customs, and fosters feelings of group identity” (Mercuri & Patricia, p. 14), thereby enabling individuals to express who they are and transmit cultural knowledge within a given society (Gee, 2014).

A plethora of studies have examined the relationship between language, culture, and identity. Highlighting the symbolic weight of language in influencing speakers’ identity and cultural values, “language, identity, and culture are not mutually incompatible, but they do emerge from a feeling of society and ties” (Hamidi & Belkaid, 2023, p. 56). Nevertheless, this relationship is not universally uncontested. Studies have questioned whether language serves as a key marker for identity, arguing that identity is a fluid context-dependent concept not necessarily tied to language (Edward, 2009). In line with this perspective, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) elucidate that “identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices” (p. 585) Hence, identity is expressed through both communicative and non-linguistic means. A study conducted by Gyasi et al (2015) highlights that, non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and, images, and physical appearance, tend to influence the speaker’s sense of self and identity, highlighting that language is not the central detriment across all social and cultural settings. Though contested, there remains a broad consensus that language, identity, and culture are interconnected, as language carries meaning, culture gives it context, and identity transforms it (Cohen et al., 2024).

3. Social Media and Language

Social media has emerged as a pivotal platform for communication and social interaction (Akhmedova, 2014). Beyond its role as a mere conduit for exchanging messages, it serves as a critical arena for social and cultural networking while influencing public discourse (Cérine et al., 2024). Accordingly, users may be able to swiftly adapt to evolving trends, thereby facilitating the rapid dissemination of information (Lewis et al., 2010). Notably, social media provides a prominent environment in which language learning occurs through authentic interactions. By participating in conversations, sharing content, and engaging with specific online communities, individuals are exposed to language change in practical and meaningful contexts, leading to vocabulary enhancement, idiomatic competence, and cultural literacy (Cabera, 2018). Hence, it offers a social space for users to express their ideas and thoughts while simultaneously engaging with diverse linguistic and cultural practices (Bahri et al., 2013). Nevertheless, despite its notable advantages, it is not void of limitations. While it facilitates intercultural connection, content sharing, enhanced linguistic repertoires, it may promote informal language usage, contributing to the erosion of standard grammar and spelling and potentially engendering a generation less proficient in formal writing skills (Bouchikhi & Bounanami, 2016).

4. Visual Memes as Agents of Language Change and Cultural Identity

Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, is the first to introduce and coin the term “meme” in his book *“The Selfish Gene”* to represent a cultural analog to the gene, highlighting

how ideas and behaviours can spread within a society through imitation. Dawkins (1981) states that:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (p. 192).

In the same context, Shifman (2013) explains how the process of imitation is central to internet memes, often modified to fit a certain context, humor, or a message. According to her, the imitation process is not merely about copying; rather it involves adapting the meme to fit new social and cultural contexts. Petrove (2021), elucidates that memes are widely used and understood by individuals irrespective of age, gender, and cultural background. This growing prominence highlights their role in bridging national cultures and influencing identities within cyber communities. The concept of “internet meme” is a term used to express and demonstrate a piece of content, such as jokes, images, videos, phrases, and ideas from one person to another via the internet. Thus, it allows users to transmit social and cultural ideas (Castaño Díaz, 2013), serving as “cultural symbols and ideas that spread online at lightning speed, often edited and adapted by the most ordinary internet users” (The Journalift, 2024, para. 5). Essentially, they function as a prominent mode of online communication, as internet users are able to generate meaning through themes, symbols, and contexts, often employing humor to engage audiences (Kariko, 2013). Semiotic analyses of memes, such as Sulhar’s (2016) study of “Scumbag Steve” and Sayani’s (2013) work on “Poker Face” and “Okay” memes, reveal that memes operate as both communicative and cultural instruments, with their significance shaped by linguistic and cultural contexts. Importantly, research studies have highlighted the potential role of memes in facilitating cross-cultural communication and contributing to the globalisation of online interaction, functioning as social indicators and reflecting broader media and cultural trends (Dwivedi, 2023; Wang, 2024). Hence, it is worth noting that memes may enhance interaction by increasing engagement and simplifying complex ideas, thereby bridging cultural gaps, particularly in cross-cultural communication.

5. Research Methodology

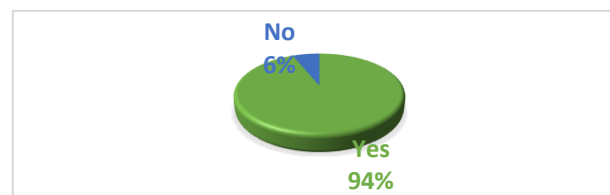
The study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine the influence of English memes on linguistic behaviour and identity expression among Master 1 students of Linguistics at the English Department of Ibn-Khaldoun University of Tiaret. A total of 80 students, aged between 22 and 24, participated, all of whom were active users of Facebook, frequently exposed to and sharing memes in both English and Algerian Spoken Arabic (ASA). Age was thus selected as the key variable, as younger adults are generally more engaged with digital culture and more likely to incorporate memes into their language practices, thereby representing a tech-savvy cohort for analysis. This selection was prompted by a preliminary classroom observation, where students frequently employed meme-influenced expressions, such as “POV”, “fact”, “it be like that sometimes”, and “sheesh” to reflect aspects of their social and cultural identity.

Data were collected through a combination of an open-ended questionnaire and systematic online observation of Facebook posts shared by the participants. The questionnaire was designed to elicit qualitative analysis of students’ perceptions of the influence of English memes on their linguistic behaviours and identity performance. Participants described the frequency of

their meme use, the contexts in which they shared memes, and how memes shaped their interactions with others. These responses were then subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to memes as strategies for language choice and identity expression. Simultaneously, online observation of publicly shared meme posts provided direct evidence of how participants used language in real digital contexts. An initial survey of numerous posts identified recurring linguistic patterns and identity-related content, from which four representative memes were purposively selected for closer examination. Each post was individually analysed to assess how it reflected participants' use of language and identity negotiation, particularly in relation to their age-related engagement with digital culture.

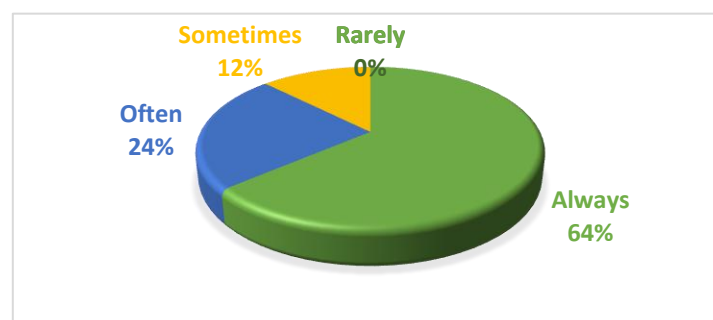
The analysis integrated both thematic and descriptive statistical procedures. Statistical assessment established a baseline regarding (1) participants' conceptual familiarity with memes and (2) the frequency of their engagement, while thematic analysis of questionnaire responses highlighted patterns in perceptions, attitudes, and identity-related behaviours. Accordingly, the questionnaire responses were systematically organized into four themes: (1) students' familiarity with meme culture, (2) the frequency of students' engagement with memes on Facebook, (3) memes as modes of communication, and (4) memes as markers of social and cultural identity. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and subsequently gave their informed consent to participate. Hence, ethical considerations were maintained to ensure participant confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Fig.1. Students' Familiarity with Meme Culture



As displayed in the figure above, the majority of the students (94%, $N=75$) reported familiarity with the concept of memes, while 6% ($N= 5$) indicated unfamiliarity. Hence, the high level of awareness highlight that memes are conceptually understood among the participants, thereby providing a reliable foundation for subsequent analyses of their perceptions.

Fig.2. Frequency of Students' Engagement with Memes on Facebook



As illustrated in figure 2, the majority of students reported engaging with memes on a regular basis. Specifically, 64% ($N= 51$) reported a consistent interaction, while 24% ($N= 19$) demonstrated a frequent engagement. A smaller proportion, representing 12% ($N=10$) reported their engagement as “sometimes”, indicating a non-regular and less stable pattern of interaction compared to the majority. However, none selected “rarely” and “never”, which constitutes memes as an established mode of communication widely acknowledged by students.

- **Memes as Modes of Communication**

Students’ responses revealed the potential role of memes as an effective medium for conveying meaning. One student noted, “I can express exactly what I want to say when I make it through memes” (S13), while another stated “it makes me deliver what I intend to say that it became a habit to use even with my friends in private” (S45). This suggests that, beyond their humorous value, memes function as a strategic medium through which students communicate their ideas and thoughts. Another student added, “sometimes, when I am chatting with my friends and I try to open up about a certain experience, to lessen the seriousness I send it in a meme form to communicate it better and in a shortly manner” (S28). This excerpt indicates that memes function as intentional communicative instruments that permit users to encode meaning in a precise and contextually appropriate way than conventional texts. Additionally, they provide a time-efficient mode of communication, as they allow students to express and convey their ideas and emotions without lengthy explanations, which is particularly essential in fast-paced digital interactions. Furthermore, the use of memes to “lessen the seriousness” of a message demonstrates their pragmatic value, as they allow students to manage the social context that extends beyond literal language. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with socio-semiotic and multimodal communication frameworks, which posit that meaning-making extends beyond language to include images, symbols, and other hybrid communicative forms (Jewitt, 2009; Halliday, 1975). Memes, therefore, represent a multimodal communicative channel in which textual and visual elements interact to construct meaning collaboratively between the sender and the receiver. This positions memes not merely as a medium of humour and entertainment but as a strategically employed channel for expressing ideas, experiences, and intentions with clarity and efficiency, aligning with findings from previous studies on their role in enhancing communication and mutual understanding (Vacca et al., 2022 & Al Balushi, 2025).

- **Memes as Markers for Social and Cultural Identity**

The findings revealed that memes serve not only as communicative tools but also as instruments for expressing social and cultural identity. Several students highlighted that the memes they engage with reflect shared social values and cultural perspectives. One student highlighted that “I enjoy sharing and making memes related to our culture. Not only they’re funny but can also give others from different countries glimpses of who we are”. This suggests that memes function as tools for expressing cultural identity, allowing students to signal belonging and cultural knowledge, while also acknowledging outsiders about their sociocultural context. Similarly, another student explained, “memes about our daily experiences make me feel connected to others in my community; it’s like we share the same jokes and perspectives” (S54). This highlights the performative nature of digital identity, as individuals strategically selected and shared content that resonates with their personal and peer group values.

Furthermore, students' engagement with memes can also be interpreted through the lens of identity theory and social signaling. By sharing memes that reflect their cultural values and social bonding, students actively performed and reinforced aspects of their personal and group identity. Memes thus serve as a form of symbolic currency. That is to say, those who understand and create culturally specific meme content can gain online social recognition and strengthen bonds with their peer networks. Beyond signaling local cultural identity, memes provided a space for students to negotiate their identities by blending local and global influences. Notably, students engaged with memes that incorporate western cultural references and humour while embedding local linguistic, cultural, and social identity. One student explained, "most of the memes I engage with are English. However, the ones I create are a mixture of English and my own dialect. Especially if the meme talks about a Western culture and I want to relate it to ours" (S11). Another commented "Western fitness memes hit differently when blended with our culture. For example, I shared a meme comparing 'Leg Day,' a common term in global fitness culture, with 'You mean Taraweeh?' referring to the physically demanding Ramadan prayers to express how tiring Taraweeh is for the legs" (S10). Collectively, students' responses elucidate the potential impact of memes on their social and cultural identity, serving as discursive strategies through which students express, negotiate, and perform aspects of their identity and social alignment. The findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the role of memes in facilitating communication, self-expression, and cultural commentary within digital communities (Massanari, 2017 & Milner, 2016).

• *Classroom Observation*

The selected representative memes serve as illustrative examples of students' linguistic practices, revealing how language is strategically employed in digital interactions. The following four memes are presented below, demonstrating how students use language to convey cultural knowledge, shared experiences, and social belonging.

Meme 1: Mission Passed! GTA San Andreas Humour in ASA Expression



The above meme notably illustrates inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching between ASA, Standard (Arabic) and English. The English expression "mission passed! Respect" convey achievement in a humorous, globalized gaming context. /rak xrajt mən 2024/, which is written in ASA, reflects a familiar conversational tone, while /sa:liman muʕa:fan/ is used to emphasise and universalize the message, thereby enhancing the pragmatic impact of the statement. Essentially, each code is strategically selected to perform a distinct pragmatic function, providing a message that blends humour, local identity, and formal validation.

Meme 2: A meme illustrating Algerian Ramadan food traditions



The second meme, which is depicting Harira and Bourak as “the best combo in Ramadan” highlights Algerian culinary tradition and cultural identity through digital humour. Hence, the meme highlights shared cultural knowledge and social bonding, creating a sense of familiarity and belonging among Algerians. Although the text is in English, the images anchor the meme in Algerian food, demonstrating a form of visual-linguistic hybridity, where global language frames local content. Thus, the meme highlights Algerian cultural identity by pairing locally significant visuals of Algerian food with a globally accessible English caption, illustrating how digital humour bridges local tradition with global language.

Meme 3: Nostalgia and Childhood Games in Memes



The meme above illustrates how English and ASA are used to express nostalgia for local childhood games. The English text frames the emotional sentiment, while the Algerian Arabic term /yumaj' d'a/, which represents a traditional hide-and-seek game, signals the Algerian local culture and a shared communal memory. Linguistically, the meme highlights the use of intra-sentential code-switching, where English conveys general affect and ASA expresses culturally specific content. This indicates that memes not only entertain but also reflect shared experiences within a given speech community.

Meme 4: Lexical Borrowing and Humour in Memes



The meme above illustrates a humorous affection for the French loanword “Frite Omelette” while humorously contrasting it with English terms for social relationships. Notably, the meme uses multilingual wordplay to express an emotional affection for a culturally significant food item, highlighting the playful integration of French borrowed word and English vocabulary in Algerian digital humour. The strategic enumeration of English lexical items such as “friend, girlfriend, boyfriend, best friend”, all ending with “end” highlight finite social relationships. This pattern is then subverted through “only Frite Omelette has no end” to convey the speaker’s enduring and limitless affection for the dish. Thus, the meme demonstrates how Algerian digital humour combines English and French lexical borrowing to create meaning and express personal identity.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the role of English memes in shaping EFL learners’ identity and linguistic practices. The findings demonstrated that their frequent use attested to the widespread recognition of English memes as sources of humor and digital communication. As digital interaction became central to students’ social engagement, English memes functioned as catalysts for online participation, facilitating both identity expression and social alignment within virtual communities. Moreover, students’ cultural identity was prominently conveyed through meme content, allowing them to signal a sense of belonging and engage with shared cultural traditions. The study further revealed that memes operated as strategic modes of communication, enabling learners to convey complex ideas, emotions, and experiences succinctly, to navigate social contexts, and to moderate the seriousness of their messages more effectively than conventional texts, thereby reflecting their pragmatic and multimodal communicative value. Importantly, engagement with English memes influenced students’ linguistic practices, as they exhibited fluid code-switching, both inter- and intra-sentential, between English and their mother tongue (ASA) and selectively employed French loanwords to express affective stance, humor, and social meaning. This multilingual practice highlighted how meme culture functioned as a medium for strategic linguistic expression and identity performance. Drawing on the study’s findings, EFL teachers could consider the formal integration of memes into language classrooms while maintaining academic rigor. Future research could further examine how memes, despite their informal nature, support linguistic development and identity negotiation across generations and educational contexts.

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