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From classic political cartoons to memes in Romanian satirical news

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This paper aims at showing how both classic political cartoons and memes are used by Romanian satirists to point out the social and political shortcomings within the Romanian society. This type of humour is equally used by satirists, along with satirical texts, to criticize politicians' lack of responsibility, but also the lack of activism of their readers. This analysis of both classic cartoons and memes in three Romanian satirical news websites (timesnewroman.ro, academiacatavencu.ro and catavencii.ro) will be made following the six humour knowledge resources (Attardo 2001). This way, I will be able to show how humour gets created differently in political cartoons and memes, even though their final purpose is the same: criticize and make people laugh. I will be discussing about their differences in terms of their construction, the decontextualization and recontextualization process, the incongruity-resolution and nonsense humour and the use of texts, to maximize images' message, in balloons, captions or titles.

Key-words: *humour, cartoons, internet memes, politics, satirical news*

1. Introduction

Journalism has changed a lot lately. Since the early 2000's, researchers started to discuss more and more about a hybrid media system (Juho and Mikko 2018), which is the mixture of various types of discourses genres that one can clearly observe in the news, as a result of a cultural globalization. This phenomenon can also be observed in the way satirical journalists started to create their cartoons, as they have slowly made the transition from classic cartoons to memes (*cut-and-paste Internet jokes*, according to Kuipers 2005). One should not see this switch just by the transformations of media discourses genres, but take it to a cultural extent, as the change in how both journalists and their readers are starting to perceive the world. Albeit the use of cartoons and memes in satirical news aim, firstly, at creating humour and laughing at the social and

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political shortcomings, their creators also want to draw their readers' attention on perspectives less highlighted by traditional media and, therefore, influence them to take a stand and become more politically active.

The present paper discusses about how classic cartoons and memes use humour mechanisms differently, even though their purpose is the same: make their readers laugh meanwhile criticizing the system. This is a comparative approach, as I will concurrently be analysing a classic political cartoon and a meme, created by satirical journalists, to underscore their differences. I have chosen to refer only to *political* cartoons and memes as this is the most frequent addressed topic within the Romanian satirical news.

2. Literature review

Political cartoons were intensely studied by researchers, who have come to the conclusion that visual satire targeting political leaders dates back to the Greco-Roman period, in the form of graffiti, to be then transformed, in time, and spread all around the world, until they have started to be used in the newspapers, in Europe, between the 1700-1800, during the so-called *golden ages of caricature* (for a broader image of cartoons' evolution, see Chen 2018).

Since their very beginning, cartoonists used symbols to communicate, mostly to caricaturize and criticize the society and its leaders. In addition to that, cartoons became a powerful tool as people started to ask for more humour in the media, hereof the emergence of *infotainment*, especially seen on TV shows. This phenomenon and audience's demands made editors insert cartoons in their weekly newspapers, serving to both people's needs: information and humour.

The term *meme* was firstly used by Richard Dawkins, in 1976, defining "the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation". The biologist claims that memes can refer to ideas, clothes or ways of thinking that are extremely quickly spread, but he also points out three qualities a meme should have: fecundity, longevity and copying-fidelity (Dawkins 2006). However, I will later prove that, when it comes to satirical news memes, one cannot talk about any of these qualities at all.

The emergence of *Internet* memes came as a natural effect of technology's quick evolution, as Internet users started to have more access to internet tools that made possible the overlap of different symbols in order to create an image, insert it in a text and express one's perspectives on society. This way, normal people can have a voice and take a stand, thus just a virtual one, in terms of the transformations they were seeing in the society. By posting memes, internet users start talking and creating meaning, which is an extremely important turn in the society. However, *Internet*

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Memes are different from what Dawkins was previously talking about. 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. (Diaz 2013, 97)

When talking about cartoons and memes used by journalists in satirical news websites, things are quite different. When it comes to media, journalists must be very careful while creating such images, so that their creations/symbols to send the enough amount of information for their readers to get the intended message. If they fail doing so, the whole cartoon/meme will be just a mixture of non-sense elements. There must be a sort of conceptual agreement between the satirist and the reader: the latter must be familiar with the presented symbols; s/he must have a certain *background knowledge*, so needed when it comes to creating humour in general. However, it is not just about knowing the social and political context of a specific moment, but about being familiar with the cultural conventions (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018).

Just as the texts, images can have a great impact on people when giving information on what's happening in the society. Through the use of symbols, political cartoons and memes become *reasoned arguments*. It is a complex system of symbols, pictures, and words put together in a way that newspaper readers who understand the intended message of the cartoonist, will better understand the issue that the cartoonist addresses (Bush 2012, 1).

The study of cartoons and memes is closely related to representation: "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (Hall 1997, 15). As pointed out by Hall, one thinks about culture in terms of the shared "conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which govern the relationships of translation between them." (Hall 1997, 21) This is how one comes to understand all the symbols and the references they are targeting in cartoons and memes as well. Furthermore, the author highlights two approaches to representations: the semiotics and the discursive approach (for more, see Hall 1997). These two approaches have led to the study of memes from a visual rhetoric perspective, which represents the interpretation of memes as persuasive texts (Huntington 2013).

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, I will be analysing political cartoons and memes using the six knowledge resources developed by Raskin and Attardo. In Viktor Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour, the *script opposition* was the main characteristic of humour's creation, however, later, in the

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Attardo and Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humour, there were introduced other five knowledge resources: *language, narrative strategy, target*, *situation* and *logical mechanisms* (see also Attardo 2001).

3. Cartoons and memes in Romanian satirical news

Satirical news websites have emerged in Romania as a way of parodying the traditional news websites and the topics they address. All three satirical news websites chosen to be analysed (timesnewroman.ro, academiacatavencu.ro and catavencii.ro) are parodying traditional Romanian publications, starting from the approached topics, to titles and the construction of their webpages. However, as I am talking about satire, parody and humour, their structure is not stable: they may place the punchline of the news in the title, the headline, the actual text or just in the image. This works for their cartoons and memes as well. Considering the fact that we are talking about journalists parodying journalists, their memes and cartoons are even more humorous and pushed to an exaggerated extent, sometimes an absurd one, to criticize the media first, for the way they are treating the subject, and secondly, the political leaders or events the satirical news is about.

Cartoons and memes in Romanian satirical news are used whether as single images, sending one or two messages, targeting a political event or a politician, accompanied by a title, or along with satirical text, meant to increase their initial intended message.

All three satirical news websites I have chosen use cartoons to express their views on society, however, they are doing it differently. Meanwhile *academiacatavencu.ro* and *catavencii.ro* are mostly using, in their separate sections, classical cartoons, caricatures in their very old style, with exaggerated shapes, and memes only accompanying the usual satirical news, to make them even funnier and increase their messages, *timenewroman.ro* creates a different kind of cartoons, more colourful, like the ones used in comics, and memes to each one of their news. The purpose of this paper is not, however, to show the differences between these three satirical news publications in general, but the differences between their cartoons and memes.

3.1. Construction

The very first difference one may notice between political cartoons and memes is their *construction*. Cartoons are created by specialists, caricaturists, from scratch, always using new symbols and new texts to express their ideas. They are creating

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the whole story around the target, they give life to their characters- most of the times the politicians their messages are targeting-, according to their personal view on them, exaggerating their shapes in order to highlight the difference between what is real/absurd, which is also where humour comes from. Memes, instead, are already created images, which are overlapped for the same purpose. However, they are easier to create, as the satirists take an image with their target, cut it, and paste it over another image to match their intended message. Most of the times, when creating a meme, the satirist chooses to crop the face of their target and paste it on images to match the context of their news.

Besides, memes are highly dependent on the internet and its tools, in comparison with cartoons whose creation, from the very beginning, only needed a pen. This is also why internet memes are seen as an expression of today's society, marked by the quick evolution of technology, meanwhile cartoons are starting to be less used in newspapers.

During 2019's runoff presidential electoral campaign, most of the attention went on former prime-minister Viorica Dăncilă, who ran for president along chief of state Klaus Iohannis. During her prime-minister mandate, she did many grammar mistakes or inappropriate gestures during official visits or press conferences, therefore she was characterized as unexperienced or even silly by many people, particularly Internet users. She then became the target of many bad jokes highlighting how Romania will be ruined if she will ever be elected. Viorica Dăncilă entered the Romanian political scene quite suddenly, in 2018, when she was proposed as prime-minister by the Social Democratic Party, becoming the first Romanian women to ever have such position. From the very beginning, Dăncilă got the attention of both national and international media due to her bad grammar, which turned her into satirists and caricaturists' source and target of humour.

Figure 1. Poster in *catavencii.ro*

Figure 2. Meme in *timesnewroman.ro*

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Figure 1 illustrates a poster with former Romanian prime-minister, Viorica Dăncilă, and her presidential election slogan "*A hard-working and committed president*" and a simple voter praying "*May God keep us away from the diligence of a stupid person*". The cartoon is especially created by the satirist, who, by choosing not to give his target, former prime-minister Viorica Dăncilă, certain face expressions, wants to highlight her lack of decision-making ability, lack of resoluteness, so much claimed in the Romanian mass media. It also points out the many news claiming she was just a tool used by the former leader of the Social Democratic Party.

In *Figure 2*, there are two different images which are overlapped. The first image, which was cut and insert it into the screenshot of the TV news, is the image picturing a fight in a bar; on top of that one, there comes a cropped picture with the former prime-minister's face, taken from its initial context, just for the final message of the satirist to be created. What the satirist wanted to do was to come with two pictures to match the headline of the TV news show, a statement made by the former prime-minister: *"Dăncilă: I will fight for every Romanian"*. Therefore, the satirist's intention was to literally express the headline of the TV news through images, in order to bring to front the absurdity of such a stance coming from a politician who is known for not being able to accomplish her duties.

The pragmatic phenomenon used both in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* is *hyper-understanding*. *Hyper-understanding* is the exploitation of speaker's words through changing the interpretation of the initial meaning (Brone 2008, in Constantinescu 2012). Thus, if in *Figure 1* the one to apparently exploit the meaning of prime-minister's slogan is the voter, the character created by the satirist, in *Figure 2* the exploitation is being made directly by the satirist, and not through characters especially designed for that. For *Figure 1*, through a more complex process, the satirist created characters (the voter) to better underscore Romanians' general stance before the elections, their complaint against the target, hence there is a higher possibility for readers to identify themselves with this character. Therefore, one can talk about voter's hypostasis and his perspective on prime-minister's candidacy (*Figure 1*) and satirists' perspective (*Figure 2*).

For *Figure 1,* the opposed scripts are real-absurd, the context is the presidential election campaign, the target is Viorica Dăncilă, the logical mechanisms are hyper-understanding, subversion and substitution and the narrative strategy is the reflection and the image.

The opposed scripts for *Figure 2* are real-non-real, the context is the prime-minister's presidential election campaign, the target is Viorica Dăncilă, the logical mechanisms are hyper-understanding, subversion and substitution and the narrative strategy is the image.

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3.2. Decontextualization and recontextualization

Another important difference between classic cartoons and memes is the *decontextualization - recontextualization* process. As mentioned above, memes are the result of two or three images, overlapped, in order to create a meaning. This process of taking a picture from one place and paste it on top of another picture involves decontextualization - cutting a picture from its initial context - and recontextualization - paste it into another context, usually, when talking about humor, a totally different one. I found this process extremely important for the creation of humor in memes, as usually these exact opposed contexts are the ones to create humor through following the script opposition.

Figure 3. Meme in *timesnewroman.ro*

Figure 4. Meme in *timesnewroman.ro*

Figure 5. Meme in *timesnewroman.ro*

Figure 6. Cartoon in *academiacatavencu.ro*

In *Figures 3, 4* and *5*, the satirists have taken the picture with the former prime-minister's face and pasted it on three different images and three different contexts to highlight her lack of experience for the position she held, by pasting her face on top of pictures representing contexts she would better fit in: Photoshop activities, crossword puzzles or Disneyland. All these memes have emerged during the 2019

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presidential campaign, aimed at making fun of her running for president. *Figure 6* illustrates former prime-minister Viorica Dăncilă and her Social Democratic Party colleague, Eugen Teodorovici, while throwing out of the plane the former Education minister, Ecaterina Andronescu. This caricature emerged after former prime-minister's announcement that she removed Ecaterina Andronescu from office due to her wrong statements made during a TV intervention.

All these memes are introducing the image of Viorica Dăncilă into whole new different contexts: *Figure 3* comes with the title "*Viorica will continue with the plastic surgery, until she will get to look just like the president!", Figure 4* comes with the title "*The motion passed! Now, Viorica leaves the Government and gets back to the Romanian Academy!*"; *Figure 5* has the title "*Viorica cancelled her meeting with Mike Pence to have more time to spend at Disneyland*". All images are also targeting different social and political events that the prime-minister attended and got mass-media's attention: *Figure 3*, running for president along Klaus Iohannis, *Figure 4* the day when she and the government she was leading was taken down and *Figure 5*, her official visit to Washington, USA. Humour comes here exactly from the opposite scripts between the context where the picture was taken from and the context in which it was inserted. Satirists have managed to create a *recognizable local symbol*- the prime-minister's bewildered face- so that each time she does something that gets media's attention in a negative way, they would take this image and insert it into other pictures to match their satirical intention. These three memes would be humorous even if they had not come with titles, because of the inappropriate alignment of such different contexts.

The opposed scripts for *Figures 3, 4, and 5* here are real-absurd, smart-stupid, the logical mechanisms are exaggeration, hyperbolization and irony, the narrative strategy is the image and the target is the prime-minister Viorica Dăncilă.

For *Figure 6*, the opposed scripts are real-non-real, the logical mechanism is subversion and absurdity, the narrative strategy is image and dialogue and the targets are, indeed, prime-minister Viorica Dăncilă, and the former minister of education, Ecaterina Andronescu.

Therefore, one can talk, when it comes to memes, about an image-based decontextualization and recontextualization process. However, when it comes to cartoons, the decontextualization and recontextualization process is quite different. In *Figure 6*, for example, in order for humour to be effective, the caricaturists have used a pseudo-dialogue (character's lines comes as an answer to a previous question), placed in the balloon, to enhance picture's meaning: "*Done, boss, we*

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saved the Romanian education system". Here, the decontextualization and recontextualization process is no longer just image-based, alike in memes, but it has to be supported by the text, otherwise, the cartoon's message would hardly get to the readers. This leads to another difference between memes and classic cartoons in Romanian satirical news, which is the nonsense humour and incongruity-resolution humour.

3.3. Nonsense humour and incongruity-resolution humour

In political cartoons, journalists are creating a story, as pointed above, wherein they are placing a punchline which the reader gets to after solving the incongruities. In nonsense humour, alike most of the memes on these satirical news, the punchline can come up with no resolution at all or, in some cases, it can raise new different incongruities. Furthermore, experts have claimed that nonsense humour is actually a superior type of humour, something more artistic and sophisticated (Samson 2008). Therefore, political cartoons seem to be less funny than political memes, even when targeting the same politician, as pointed in *Figures 3, 4* and *5* and in *Figure 6*. In fact, studies have shown that this difference is based on neurological facts:

> the neuronal data of our study supports that humorous stimuli based on incongruity-resolution and nonsense are processed differently: The circumstance that in incongruity-resolution cartoons more information can be integrated and more sense can be established leads to higher activation in the TPJ[2], the manipulation of this information (scripts) leads to more activation of the SFG[3] (superior frontal gyrus and closer reference to reality leads to more activation of the amPFC[4]. In nonsense humorous stimuli, on the other hand, people laugh more about the absurdity of rather incompatible scripts. This corresponds to less activation in frontal and temporo-parietal regions. (Samson 2008, 121)

[2] TPJ-temporo-parietal junction is an area that is involved in integrating information or coherence building (Samson 2008, 77).

[3] SFG-superior frontex gyrus is involved in putting all things together, making sense (Samson 2008, 73).

[4] AmPFC is the anterior medial prefrontal cortex, which is essential for the self-referential mental activity (Samson 2008, 73).

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3.4. Titles, balloons and captions

When it comes to texts accompanying political cartoons and memes, things are really complex. First of all, they all come with titles, as they are used in satirical new websites, which are parodying the traditional news. As for *captions* and *balloons*, there are large studies on how texts should be placed in cartoons in order to be less confusing for the reader (see Hempelmann and Samson 2008), as the text is an important tool the reader uses to get to solve the incongruities in an image: "if those elements of text are presented in the wrong order, the reader will lose interest in the text" (Bush 2012: 49).

In *Figure 7,* President Klaus Iohannis's face was pasted on a picture with a muscular body, expressing power and firmness. This picture emerged after Iohannis went to an international agriculture fair, INDAGRA, organized in Romania, in October 2019, where he claimed that a performant agriculture can only be achieved through the hard work of an efficient ministry of agriculture.

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, most of the memes are used in satirical news along with a full text/satirical news, while political cartoons can carry a strong message *per se,* with small texts in captions or balloons. Political cartoons, as most of the times are addressing complex political or social-political facts, must give the reader some extra information, this way making sure the message will be correctly interpreted, thus, the humour will be effective. Hence, in memes, texts are not inserted in the image, because *the image is just a part of the whole news*, meanwhile *cartoons are the actual news*, with some extra information in balloons or captions.

Figure 7. Meme in *academiacatavencu.ro*

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In *Figure 7*, if the meme came with no caption or description at all, it would only be nonsense humour, created by the inappropriate overlap between the president's face and muscular body. However, this picture comes with a large story and a title saying "*Iohannis, INDAGRA, because he wants to get rid of the political elite's title as the biggest raiser of cows and pigs*". After reading the title, the meme starts to make sense, as the muscles suggest the president's power to actually do such a thing. The opposed scripts are real-absurd, smart-stupid, the context is president's visit to INDAGRA fair, the logical mechanism is hyper-understanding and exaggeration, the narrative strategy is the image and the targets are the president, Klaus Iohannis, and the Romanian political class.

Political cartoons, instead, come up with dialogues, normally in balloons. This method is very old and has become a symbol of cartoons during time. Just like balloons, captions are used by satirical journalists to guide their readers towards their intended message. Both balloons and captions help the reader identify the characters, if they are not so recognizable, the political or social event they are targeting, or simply their perspective on it. This is also because memes use real photos of the targets/politicians, but cartoons work with what the cartoonists are creating, thus, the chances for their characters to be unrecognizable and the message to be confusing is bigger.

Figure 8. Cartoon in *academiacatavencu.ro*

The caricature in *Figure 8* is the result of many news in the media calling on the high corruption level that was smouldering in the Social Democratic Party, whose

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former chief, Liviu Dragnea, was many times named thief or corrupt by political analysts, media and Internet users. The Social Democratic Party ran the Government between 2017 and 2019, when it tried to modify the Justice Law through an Emergency Act, an action which led to many street protests and the diaspora demonstration from August 10th, when gendarmes hurt the protestors. Many satirists and humourists have targeted the Social Democratic Party chief, underlining Romanian's feelings and perspectives on his actions.

In *Figure 8,* the lines in the balloon ("*It is the third time when you come back empty-handed. If you do the same tomorrow, I will send you to get some lessons from Dragnea*) helps readers understand that the target of the cartoons is the political class (mainly Liviu Dragnea, the former leader of the Social Democratic Party), its lack of effectiveness and the corruption within the system. If there had been no text at all, the image would have not created humour, but it would have only illustrated three thieves having a discussion. The opposed scripts are fair-unfair, good-bad, the context is the image Liviu Dragnea has in the media, a corrupt politician, the narrative strategies are the image and the dialogue, the logical mechanism is the figure-ground reversals and the target is Liviu Dragnea.

4. Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to show the differences between political cartoons and memes in terms of their construction and the mechanisms that trigger humour. I have come to the conclusion that these are different when it comes to their *construction*, as political cartoons are fully created by caricaturists/ cartoonists, step by step, placing their perspective on the target by the shape they give to their characters, while memes are the result of different pieces, overlapped images, that the satirists are collecting in order to better enhance their message. Another difference I have noticed is that memes involve an *image-based decontextualization-recontextualization process*, exaggerated or absurd, most of the times leading to the creation of *nonsense humour*, considered by many a superior type of humour, while cartoons are only *re-contextualizing some statements or events*, also exaggeratedly, however, to a smaller extent. This second difference led to the third identified distinction between political cartoons and memes, which is the prevailing use of *nonsense humour in memes* and the *incongruity-resolution humour in cartoons*. Though these two types of humour involve different neurological processes, they are both laughable. The final difference was related to the use of texts, whether it was in captions, balloons or titles. As exemplified above, memes are only one small part of the entire satirical news and they cannot work alone, but along with large texts to

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explain their contexts. Cartoons, however, along with texts in captions or balloons can produce humour on their own. These changes in the Romanian satirical media system are the result of a cultural globalization and also an answer to readers' multiple needs: information and humour. This may also happen because humour was, and continues to be, a controversial phenomenon not just for linguistic researchers, but also for psychology, philosophy or social experts.

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