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MEMETIC DRIFT, FLOATING SIGNIFIERS, AND THE JETSAM OF POLITICS

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Abstract

Memes occupy a central position in the culture of the internet, which is at the center of contemporary culture. Therefore it is crucial to understand how memes can be used for political purposes. A basic issue is that, in the process of production of the variants of a meme, the contents of the meme change. I refer to these changes as memetic drift. In this paper, I show that memetic drift tends to go from specific to generic meanings, but beyond that it is random and unpredictable. This has profound implications for the use of memes for political discourse as the producers of the memes cannot control how the memes will be adapted, remixed, and changed. This process is investigated in some detail in a case study of the Dark Brandon meme, a pro-Biden meme that originates in anti-Biden memes. This shows that memes are floating signifiers, i.e., signs that do not connect fixed signifiers and signifieds (meanings). Because of the random nature of the drift of these floating signifiers I propose the metaphor of memes as “jetsam,” cultural debris that belong to no one in particular, but can be seized by any community for their purposes.

Key words

Meme; memetic drift; floating signifiers; political memes; Dark Brandon

Introduction

Understanding memes is crucial to understanding the internet. As Zulli et al. put it (2024):

“Internet culture is distinctly humorous, especially as the internet “meme” (...) became the basic unit for discussing and critiquing cultural phenomena (Attardo, 2023). Meme humor is central to online discourse and a key component of youth political expression (Penney, 2020).” (Zulli et al. 2024)

Memes influence political discourse: “exposure to political memes is related to political activity” and “political memes resonate emotionally with audiences” (Halvorsen and Weeks 2023). Thus, understanding memes is more than just an exercise in humor studies or semiotics. It becomes a study in how political discourse is shaped. In Attardo (2020), I examined the Cheryl She Shed anchor meme (a television

advert, for an insurance company) and showed how the numerous memes it inspired “drifted” away from the original meanings, characters, situation, etc. of the meme, to accommodate various interests of the people remixing, mashing up, or parodying the anchor meme. In what follows, I will assume this “memetic drift” model. For example, in the anchor meme, the husband’s emotionless behavior and listless speech was interpreted by many viewers as an indication that he was responsible for the burning down of the shed (Cheryl is shown calling her insurance company to confirm that the shed was insured). In successive iterations of the meme, some memes suggest that it was Cheryl herself that burned down the shed to meet good looking firemen. In other versions, the burning down of the shed is attributed to various political and cultural figures. Obviously the meaning of the meme changes significantly with these remixes.

The term “jetsam” may be unfamiliar to non-nautically inclined readers, so let’s recall briefly the difference between flotsam and jetsam: both refer to debris or other materials washed ashore. However, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,

“Flotsam is defined as debris in the water that was not deliberately thrown overboard, often as a result from a shipwreck or accident. Jetsam describes debris that was deliberately thrown overboard by a crew of a ship in distress, most often to lighten the ship’s load.”

The difference is significant, under maritime law, because flotsam remains the property of the ships’ owner, whereas jetsam is the property of whoever finds it.

In keeping with the marine metaphors of “memetic drift” and “floating signifiers” (see below), I propose to consider political memes as jetsam: they belong to whomever claims them. This has significant consequences in the way online memetic political discourse is conceptualized.

It is obvious that memes are signs. They clearly display an often multimodal signifier and just as obviously, they refer to things and ideas, such as cats, penguins, screaming women, Chuck Norris, etc. but also to significant political issues, such as the Supreme Court, reproductive rights, taxation, voting rights, freedom of speech, etc. Here we need to be a little careful: a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The signifier are the images, the text, colors, any visual factors, etc. with the proviso that any of these may be absent (e.g., some memes do not have images). The signified is a little more complex to define: on the one hand we have the referents of the various components of the meme. For example, in some of the Dark Brandon memes, President Biden is seen wearing or putting on dark sunglasses. So, obviously enough, the referents [Biden] and [sunglasses] are part of the reference of the meme. We will ignore the fact that technically it’s not the referents, but a mental representation of the referents that is part of the sign because it is not significant in this context. However, while the signified referent of the meme-as-sign is important, it is not all-important. There is another part of the meaning of the meme which we will call the “point” of the meme. The point of the meme is the overall interpretation, enriched by connotations, pragmatic implicatures (and other inferences, contextualization cues, etc.), and contextu-

al knowledge. Going back to our example, dark sunglasses connote [cool] and therefore the point of the meme is that [Biden is cool]. Finally, there is a third level of derived meaning which is pragmatic in a different sense: it is persuasive. In this case it would be, roughly speaking [vote for Biden].

The persuasive aspect of memes takes us into the quagmire of rhetorics, traditionally the province of persuasive language, at least since Aristotle. Despite the problematic nature of the concept and its definitional vagueness, a few stable aspects emerge, the first is that persuasion may occur openly (cognitively) or more covertly, through, for example, looks, degree of confidence exhibited by the speaker, etc. The two modes are referred to as central and peripheral, respectively (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Petty and Cacioppo also point out that peripheral persuasion is less “enduring” (125; see also Gass and Seiter 2022: 45).

“If a person has low involvement with a topic or issue, he or she will be less inclined to engage in central processing and more likely to resort to peripheral processing. For example, voters with little knowledge are more likely to be swayed by politicians’ looks than voters who are informed about the candidates’ positions (Lenz & Lawson, 2011).” (Gass and Seiter 2022)

Explicitly framing the discussion of memes as forms of persuasive discourse has the advantage that we will be able to draw on the extensive literature on persuasion and attitudinal change. While this is not the focus of this paper, we will return to this in the final discussion. In the meantime, we are essentially presenting a three-layer model of memetic meaning, represented schematically in Figure 1. We should emphasize that the persuasive level is a goal and that there is no guarantee it will be met. The would-be voter may vote or not vote for Biden. Finally, it should be obvious that memes can be used for political purposes, in the etymological sense of the word, i.e., the affairs of the city-state. Memes are “evolved,” so to speak, for online political discourse: they are “a novel form of

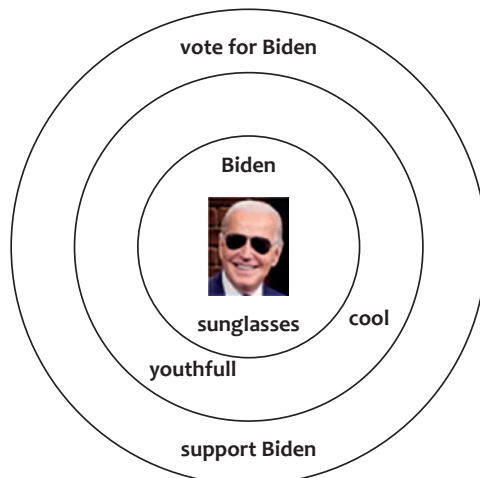


Figure 1. Three-layer model of memetic meaning

public expression to subtly subvert mass media influence, voice public dissent and activate political movements” (Winkler and Seiffert-Brockmann 2019: 221).

Mememes as floating signifiers

Because of the inherent nature of these signs and the multiplicity of “meanings” they carry, they are prime candidates from what Laclau (1996; 2005; see also Moraes 2014) calls “empty signifiers,” terms that are devoid of a reference, or perhaps less dramatically “floating signifiers” i.e., terms that change their referent depending on who is using them, when, and why. A perfect example of hollowing out of a signifier are the terms “communist” and “nazi.” When I used the latter in a study of how the extreme right used humor to spread fascist propaganda, I felt the need to define the term because both terms have been used to essentially describe something one opposes, without any regard as to whether they meet the socio-political criteria that apply. For example, the use of the term “feminazi” by the right blogosphere is prima-facie absurd, if one knows anything about the attitude of the Nazi toward women, as is the idea of American presidential candidates being “communist” or “socialist”; there are currently no candidates to the presidency that advocate the seizure of the means of production by the proletariat and/or communal ownership of said means of production.

However, the signified of mememes float for yet another reason: as they are reproduced, remixed, and mashed up, signifiers change meaning. As mentioned before, I have referred to this as memetic drift (Attardo 2020). In particular, as the distance between the original, anchor meme and the new mememes grows, a process of semantic bleaching takes place, whereby the original referents of the components of the mememes lose specificity or are ignored entirely in the new mememes until the new mememes become essentially empty, asymptotically tending toward a purely formal constructional signified (Attardo 2023; 2024).

In this paper I will use the Dark Brandon meme cycle as a case study of extreme memetic drift which resulted in a 180-degree inversion of the political valence of the “Brandon” meme, from an anti-Biden to a pro-Biden meaning. I will examine both the process and the semiotic resources used to perform this salvage and rescue of the floating signifier and will argue that mememes are political jetsam: they don’t belong to anyone, because they can be freely picked up and reused, truly “res nullius” (no-one’s property).

The Story of the Dark Brandon Meme

As American journalist Dan Rather put it, in an April 30, 2023 tweet, the Dark Brandon mememes can seem “incomprehensible.” While that is a pessimistic assessment, it is not misguided. The evolution of the meme is complex and anything-but-linear. However, thanks to Knowyourmeme, the basic evolution and components of the Dark Brandon meme are reasonably well established. We will briefly review its major steps.

The Brandon meme starts with an interview of NASCAR driver Brandon Brown. The relevant video can be seen at the link below. Figure 2 is a still from the clip. The chanting crowd can be seen on the right.



Figure 2. Brandon Brown post-race interview – Talladega Xfinity series 2021 (source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9UjglTXUJ4>)

Around 1:03 the crowd can be heard chanting “Fuck Joe Biden” The NBC interviewer repeats “Let’s go” which Brandon Brown had used a few seconds before. Hence there is a brief superposition of the crowd chanting and the interviewer saying “Let’s go, Brandon.” It is unclear whether, as some have maintained, the interviewer is trying to imply that the crowd is chanting “Let’s go, Brandon” because they are very obviously not chanting that. It seems more likely that the interviewer is trying to draw attention away from the obscene chant. Be that as it may, the two “slogans” occur briefly together. From this essentially accidental superposition “Let’s go Brandon” came to be “code” for “Fuck Joe Biden.” Henceforth I will refer to the two slogans/memes as LGB and FJB, respectively.

There has been some discussion (e.g., Plotz et al. 2022) of how this allows anti-Biden sentiment to be manifested “covertly.” I find that argument to be lacking. First and foremost, the crowd is very obviously relishing the obscenity, as the chanting goes on for a while. Second, MAGA (Making America Great Again; a well-known pro-Trump slogan which has become metonymically associated with Trump followers) and other anti-Biden supporters are generally not concerned at all with using profanity. Indeed, apparel with the FJB or similar slogans is widespread. Now, it is possible that particularly “uptight” individuals may indeed be bothered by the profanity and thus prefer to use the LGB. In a Youtube video interview of an elderly woman, in which the interviewer asks her if she knows what LGB means, she answers correctly, but does so using a softer tone of voice,

thus showing that she is embarrassed to pronounce the obscenity in an interview. Likewise, in some contexts such as TV or radio broadcasts, the FJB slogan would be censored due to the profanity, whereas LGB would presumably not. Hence, this may explain some uses of LGB. Otherwise, however, I would argue that the point of LGB is not to be “code” but it is to signal in-group membership. We know from research dating back to the 1970s (Billig and Tajfel 1973) that when a population is divided in two groups, even completely arbitrarily, there immediately develops an in-group solidarity and an out-group “discrimination” (meaning the participants treat the out-group worse than the in-group).

The dynamic that seems probable is that MAGA supporters use the code to identify each other and share in-group, us-versus-them, solidarity. This would explain how, as the LGB went mainstream, it lost its primary function of signaling in-group membership (if everyone knows what it means, then there is no “in-group discrimination” function) and therefore declined.

The LGB/FJB meme received wide distribution, within the extreme right and MAGA-adjacent spaces. The second component of the Dark Brandon meme came in 2022 and is completely unrelated to the previous one: memes called “Dark Maga” emerged in which, for example Donald Trump is photoshopped in the outfit and face mask of the Bane character from the Dark Knight Rises (2012) movie (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dark Mega meme: Trump as Bane

The point of these memes is unclear as they do not seem to be satirical of Trump but rather to be applauding his current behavior characterized in the meme as psychopathic by arguing or possibly threatening that worse behavior is to come. Be that as it may, the significance of the Dark Maga memes is not relevant to the Dark Brandon meme, except as the explanation of the “Dark X” modification. The loss of semantic specificity (from Trump to Biden) and the reduction to a grammatical modifier, which can be roughly paraphrased as [extreme] (as in

extreme sports) are typical of semantic bleaching. The third component is, rather incredibly, Anti-Biden Chinese propaganda cartoons that represent President Biden sitting on a Game of Thrones-like throne and commanding an army of zombies (see Figure 4 below). Once more what exactly the Chinese propaganda was trying to represent or imply is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant are the glowing eyes, which as the Neoliberal poster on Twitter reports, make “Biden look metal af”. This last statement requires a little explanation “metal” is slang “used to define something especially brutal or awesome” (Urban Dictionary); “af” stands for “as fuck” which is an intensifier. The glowing eyes later turn into “laser eyes” but the idea is of course similar. The dark sunglasses are explained by the need to cover the laser eyes (as seen in several superhero movies, for example).



Figure 4. Anti-Biden Chinese propaganda meme

Summing up, the Dark Brandon meme is the result of a mashup of three separate memes: 1) Let’s Go Brandon, 2) Dark Maga, and 3) Laser Eyes Biden. Let us note in passing that the semantic shift in these memes is a case of reappropriation (reclamation) from the right of the “Brandon” name and the “Dark X” memes. Reappropriation is defined as “the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its

target(s)” (Brontsema 2004: 1). Interestingly, the reappropriation of the Dark Brandon meme is acknowledged by some right-wing commentators, as seen in Figure 5 where “vanillaopinions” laments that the meme has been “coopted” by the libs.”



Figure 5. Screen capture of a Twitter comment by “vanillaopinions”

In this case there is a marked shift in polarity, from a negative to a positive assessment. Let us also note that both the “Dark X” and the “Zombie Biden” memes have been completely bleached of any semantic meaning beyond the grammatical/constructional one. The “LGB” meme has suffered an even “worse fate” (from the perspective of preserving the integrity of the meme). All that is left is a (rigid) designator (Brandon equals Biden). Incidentally, the nature of the designator is irrelevant in this context, but according to Kripke (1980) proper names are rigid, i.e., refer to the same person/thing in any context.

The earliest positive uses of a Dark Brandon meme seem to occur in 2022: “Following the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31st, 2022,



Figures 6 and 7. Dark Brandon killed AlQuaeda meme; Dark Brandon republican tears meme

by an American drone strike with no civilian casualties” (Knowyourmeme) pro-Biden Dark Brandon memes appear. Note that the complaint that the Dark Brandon meme has been “coopted” by the liberals dates August 1 (see Figure 5, above). This allows us to date fairly accurately the onset of the Dark Brandon meme in the current sense. Some memes praise Biden for the accomplishment, while critiquing Trump (Figure 6); other, are more generic, for example, the meme in Figure 7 appears in August 2022 depicting a very fit Biden, wearing work clothes (note the name tag sewn on the worksheet, typical of blue collar jobs), carrying effortlessly two 20kg water bottles. The water bottles bear the label “Republican tears”; this is a reference to another meme cycle of “drinking [someone’s] tears.” The idea being that republicans are so upset by Biden’s success that they cry and he proceeds to drink their tears. This rather peculiar meme of drinking your enemy’s tears to indicate complete dominance over them is quite widespread, and in fact probably started as an anti-liberal meme.

In October 2022, Dark Brandon memes representing Biden as smoking “weed” (marijuana) also became quite widespread. These memes are known as “dank Brandon” <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dank-brandon>. “Dank” is a complex term in contemporary slang, but it is strongly tied to drug use and generally has positive connotations (Urban dictionary: “highly potent marijuana”; “cooler than cool.”) It should be noted, in this context, that “cool Joe Biden” memes/depictions were not new, in 2022. A number of memes represent Biden playing silly pranks on then-incumbent Trump, such as changing the White House’s wifi password to “ILoveMexicans” or leaving a Kenyan passport and a prayer rug in the Oval office. These memes (which Knowyourmeme labels “Prankster Joe Biden” <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/prankster-joe-biden>) are also known as BidenBro, suggesting the Biden is behaving like a “bro” (fraternity brother).

The popularity of the Dark Brandon meme is unquestionable. For example, Dark Brandon has a Reddit ([r/DarkBRANDON](https://www.reddit.com/r/DarkBRANDON)) with 77,000 members which is rated in the top 2% reddits by size. The reddit was still very active at the time of writing, despite Biden having dropped out of the presidential race. President Biden used the Dark Brandon persona on several occasions, such as the White House Press Correspondants’ Dinner, in 2023 (see Figure 8) and on a TV appearance on the Late Night with Seth Meyers show, on Feb 27, 2024 (see Figure 9). The video clip on Youtube of the performance received over 1 million views. The video clip of Pres. Biden doing “Dark Brandon” on live TV Feb 27, 2024, can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mw0npm56wn0>.

The Biden campaign, Biden himself, and to some extent the administration, as documented by the fact that members of the Biden staff repost Dark Brandon memes, embraced the Dark Brandon narrative, as early as August 2022, see for example Figure 10, which displays an August 7 post by Andrew Bates, the White House Senior Deputy Press Secretary, at the time. Knowyourmeme reports numerous instances of such uses by prominent members of the administration. In fact, the Biden campaign doubled down on the Dark Brandon theme. Consider the merchandising, from a color changing mug, in which Brandon’s eyes glow when it is filled with hot liquid, to t-shirts (see Figures 11 and 12 respectively).

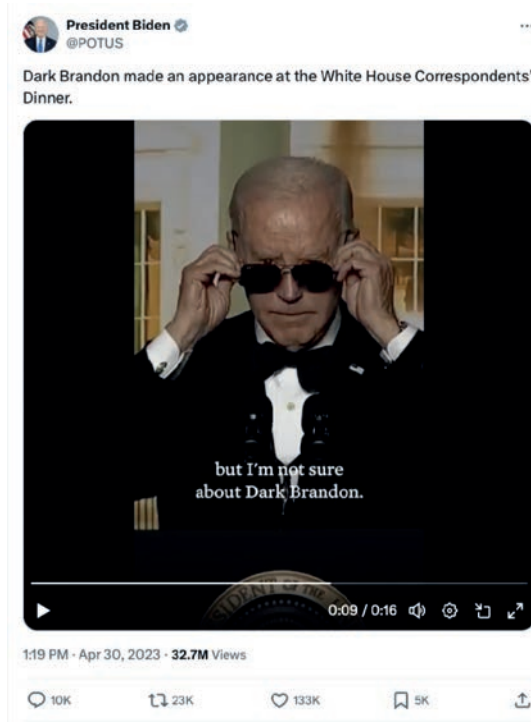


Figure 8. Dark Brandon reference posted on the Biden Twitter account concerning the White House correspondents dinner



Figure 9. Screen capture from Biden's appearance as Dark Brandon on the Seth Meyer's show

The Biden campaign on several occasions took to openly trolling the right wing conspiracies. For example, one particularly ridiculous conspiracy theory arose around the fact that Travis Kelce (quarterback for the Kansas City Chiefs) won the Super Bowl, on Feb 11, 2024. There was nothing particularly surprising about this as they had won the Super Bowl the previous year as well. However, Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce were now dating. Taylor Swift is unpopular among MAGA



Figure 10. Dark Brandon meme posted by the White House Senior Deputy Press Secretary



Figures 11 and 12. Dark Brandon merchandise for purchase on the Biden campaign web site

conspiracists because she endorsed Biden in the previous election. So there arose a conspiracy theory that the Super Bowl had been rigged, to allow Taylor Swift to endorse Biden at midgame. This was widely repeated in right wing circles (including major names, such as Vivek Ramaswamy, who was a front-runner for the Republican nomination in 2023). The day after the Kansas City Chiefs win in the Super Bowl, the following Dark Brandon meme was posted, in which Dark Brandon ironically claims responsibility for the win of the Kansas City Chiefs, by saying “Just like we drew it up.” (see Figure 13) Note incidentally that Taylor Swift



Figure 13. “Just like we drew it up” Dark Brandon meme

did not endorse President Biden at midgame. The “just like we drew it up” Dark Brandon post had received a staggering 231.8 million views, as of May 31, 2024. So there is no question that these memes are “viral” and therefore successful, in memetic terms. For a more detailed examination of the levels of interest in the Dark Brandon meme, see Figure 15, in the conclusions.

Virality as repetition

One question remains unanswered: assuming that everything we have said is true and the Dark Brandon meme does indeed position President Biden as youthful, full of energy, and “cool,” it remains to be explained how this actually could affect potential voters’ perception of Biden. In other words, is it logically possible that exposure to the Dark Brandon meme may sway voters? The answer is that it is indeed possible. There is research that shows that mere exposure to a given message may increase likability and persuasion (Gass and Seiter 2022). As Montoya

et al. (2017) put it, “liking for a stimulus increases on repeated exposure to that stimulus” (459). Of course we know that virality in memes is repeated exposure, with an added advantage: some studies have shown that excessive repetition leads to irritation and decrease in liking (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1979). However, memes display repetition with variation (the incessant creation of new variants, remixing, and mashups). This degree of variation obviates the excessive repetition problem, as seen in advertising (Schumann et al. 1990). Therefore we can come to the conclusion that memes can be persuasive.

The idea that memes are persuasive is widespread. There are numerous studies that show that they affect their audience’s engagement with brands (e.g., Razzaq et al. 2024). However, there seems to be much less evidence that exposure to memes affects the audience’s behavior in real life, so to speak. Needless to say, in the end Biden abandoned his bid for re-election, so ultimately the Dark Brandon meme was not enough to propel him to a win, but that’s perhaps putting too much weight on a simple drifted meme.

Finally, it’s worth noting that, contrary to the results reported in Moody-Ramirez and Church (2019), who found that memes tend to portray presidential candidates negatively, the portrayal of President Biden in the Brandon memes goes from negative to positive.

Hashtag hijacking

There are similarities with the hashtag hijacking phenomenon (e.g., Hagdu et al. 2013; Xanthopoulos et al. 2016; VanDam and Tan 2016; Truong et al. 2022). Hagdu et al. point out that in their data, “hashtag hijackers are more active than other politically interested users” (2013: 56). However, their definition of “hijacking” is merely usage: “an unusually high level of hashtag usage by a given leaning, rather than by the absence thereof” (55). In other words, users of a given persuasion start using a given hashtag more than their opponents. The content of the hashtag do not change (for example #obamacare still refers to the Affordable Healthcare Act, proposed by then president Obama). VanDam and Tan use a slightly different definition, closer to our interest: “Hashtag hijacking occurs when a group of users start using one of these trending hashtags to promote a different message.” (370). Here, the hashtag remains the same but the point of the meme changes. The same can be said for the example analyzed in detail in Sanderson et al. (2016): the hashtag #askjameis (the first name of an athlete at Florida State University) is hijacked by people critical of the athlete himself (he was accused of sexual misconduct), or the university, and is ridiculed. However, the hashtag itself remains unchanged. As such, hashtag hijacking is closer to the flashmob takeovers of naming contests exemplified by the BoatyMcBoatface case (see Attardo, 2023, ch. 12).

However, Menghini et al. (2022) document drift of hashtags, in cases such as #MeToo which was hijacked from the original meaning (proposed in an African American context by Tarana Burke). Menghini categorize this case as “Hashjacking that semantically changes the associated tweets (whether intentional or not).”

This is distinct from other examples they provide such as ISIS taking over #Brazil2014 to dupe people into watching their propaganda videos, or the hijacking of #MeToo by the Austrian Identitarian Movement, which do not differ from the cases discussed above.

An interesting perspective on hashjacking is provided by Apte et al. (2019) who see it as a case of fraud akin to phishing. This seems an overemphasis on the negative side since, aside from possible reputational damage, no real damage is inflicted on the victim, whereas phishing is used to steal information or money from an entity. Crucially, if we consider hashjacking a case of fraud, then drift must be avoided or limited as much as possible, since significant drift would be a tell-tale sign that the hashtag has been reappropriated.

Truong et al. (2022) consider hashtag hijacking from the point of view of play, while acknowledging that they may constitute “consumer resistance against brands in social media as a form of activism against corporate hegemony” (829). They argue that consumers, by hijacking hashtags

“playfully resist the power of corporate marketing itself, that is, to make a game of the experience of marketplace power relations. As an everyday tactic, consumers may mischievously engage with UGC campaigns to subvert what is imposed on them. These acts reveal a playfulness in culture directed against the power of marketing itself and not directly complain against the brand. Consumers resistance is towards promotional campaigns experienced as an intrusion into their online space. They resist marketing by playing with marketing campaigns” (830)

They examine as cases of playfulness both “a deliberate subversion of the campaign’s intention (Mischief) and jokes, sarcasm, ridicule, and laughter at the expense of the campaign” (831). Some of the examples, such as a Hitler Downfall parody of a Quantas campaign (#quantasluxury), would have been perfectly at home in chapter 17 of Attardo (2023), which is precisely dedicated to Hitler Downfall parodies. These cases of hijacking therefore also fall under the flash-mob takeovers previously discussed. Drift must be minimized so that the connection to the brand or the advert in the anchor meme are recognizable. What changes is what I have defined as the persuasive goal of the meme; from selling seats on Quantas (the original persuasive goal) to mocking Quantas’ position on union negotiations or more generally its brand.

Overall then, while there are unquestionable similarities between hashtag hijacking (hashjacking) and memetic drift, namely that hijackings are cases of “détournement” in which the persuasive goal of the text is altered, the differences are nonetheless significant. Primarily, whereas in hijacking the form and the referent of the meme must remain identical or at least very similar to the anchor, in memetic drift the meme may end up meaning the exact opposite of the anchor not only in the persuasive level but also in the point of the meme.

Drift and subcycles

Tsakona (2024) introduces the term “subcycle” to indicate “memes which exhibit thematic and semiotic similarities and differences from those originally produced as part of the cycle in question” (2004: 43). This definition is too general. A subcycle must necessarily include a subset of the memes in the overall cycle, hence it must specify a narrower set of scripts, oppositions, situations, semiotic resources, such as images, etc. Note that Tsakona hints at the chronological development of the meme cycle (“originally”). Indeed, the idea of drift helps. Consider the Cheryl She Shed anchor meme, discussed in Attardo (2020). Clearly the situation “insurance” is a central factor. The anchor meme and the memes closely related to it (1st generation memes) clearly revolve around insurance fraud: did Cheryl commit it? Did her listless husband? We can identify a “conspiracy” subcycle which originates directly from this aspect of the meme. When we reach the political subcycle (anti-Democrat, anti-Republican) the insurance script fades into the background. The focus is now on affixing blame. Obviously, the memes are still about burning down a shed, but the focus on Cheryl’s husband’s (lack of) affect is gone. By the time we get to the 3rd gen memes (meta), the focus has shifted away from the specifics of Cheryl’s shed and we get instead a Disaster Girl meme. Tsakona’s (2024) Babiniotis meme cycle does not include meta memes, but the difference between the “metapragmatic” linguistic subcycle and the political or COVID subcycles are just as stark. The linguistic component is entirely gone and instead the memes deliver political or pandemic messages (or mock the messaging). So, we can draw a generalization that drift tends to go from specific (lexical usage) to less specific (politics). Semantic bleaching is of course the ultimate in loss of specificity.

We can also come to the conclusion that the degree of openness of the drift in memes is variable. As Shifman and Thelwall (2009) noted,

Although Internet transmission theoretically has high copy-fidelity (i.e., accuracy), *people tended to edit the jokes mildly before reposting*. In some cases, users also changed the texts dramatically, creating new versions and counter-versions. (2571; my emphasis, SA)

Some memes allow for pretty wide drift, whereas others are more “contained.” Moreover, there is a preference for the direction of drift, beyond the specific-to-generic. Generally speaking, memes drift from non-political to political topics, as in the Babiniotis example in Tsakona (2024) or in the Cheryl She-shed example (Attardo 2020). It is possible that there may be exceptions to the non-political to political tendency. One possibility is the Seated Sanders meme, although it is not clear how political the anchor meme might have been. Another possibility is the Kate Middleton photoshop meme, which had originally a critical stance toward the “palace.” Another aspect of the directionality of shift is that certain topics are “attractors” in the complex systems theory sense: COVID 19 functioned very much as one such attractor. In other words, it was almost inevitable that a meme

ended up having a COVID subcycle during the 2020-2021 period given the prominence of the topic in national and international affairs.

A different phenomenon are hyperspecific adaptations after a meme has reached virality and has undergone semantic bleaching. For example, the Drake in an orange jacket meme (known as “Drakeposting” <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting>), has now become so bleached as to be referred to as “orange jacket guy,” completely eliding Drake, the original song Hotline Bling, and anything else related to the anchor meme. “Orange jacket guy” has now become so widespread that any good/bad opposition can be fitted to it, even hyper specific ones such as the one in Figure 14, which revolves around the rules of exponentiation in algebra (don’t ask, I had to look it up myself). Obviously, in cases like this one, the direction is from less specific to more specific topics, but therein lies the humor: discussing algebra through orange jacket guy memes is inherently silly due to the high/low mismatch between the signifier (the lowbrow Drake meme) and the signified “ $x^{1/2} = \sqrt{x}$ ” which is decidedly not lowbrow.



Figure 14. Drakeposting meme revolving around rules of exponentiation in algebra

Conclusions

The Dark Brandon meme cycle originated from the mashup of three unrelated memes: the Let’s go Brandon meme, from which it took the name “Brandon,” the Dark Maga, from which it took the term “dark” and the connotation of high intensity, and the anti-Biden Chinese propaganda cartoon from which it took the glowing eyes later elaborated into laser eyes and corresponding dark glasses. This “fit in” with the pre-existing “prankster Biden” and “broBiden” memes. Interest in the Dark Brandon meme reached its peak in 2022 and was sustained until 2024 when Biden announced he would not seek re-election (see Google Trends graph in Figure 15)

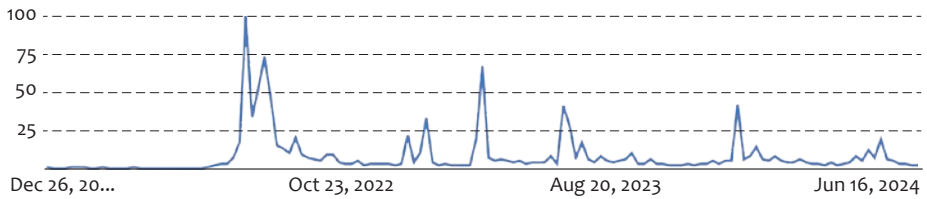


Figure 15. Google Trends graph of interest in the Dark Brandon meme

The Dark Brandon meme is interesting on different levels. Not only is it a case of reclamation of a meme, since the “Brandon” designator is turned from a slur into a point of pride, but the collective elaborations by the internet “community” (Tsakona 2020: 99) produce a whole new set of semiotic resources (the dark glasses, of course, but also the ice cream, the “malarkey”, the cartoon Biden, etc.) that are freely recombined without any thought of the original meaning which has been completely bleached. In fact, I would argue that unless this complete bleaching is assumed, the Dark Brandon memes could not function. There is no reference to Biden being a “zombie” in the Dark Brandon memes and there cannot be, as the presupposition of the Dark Brandon memes is that Biden is a force for good.

Within a broader perspective, the Dark Brandon meme cycle(s) demonstrate that memes are the jetsam of contemporary culture. They belong to whomever finds them and uses them, however they see fit. I mean this literally, as in the fact that most memes are not copyrighted/copyrightable. There have been sporadic cases of memes that are copyrighted and whose copyrights have been enforced, e.g., the Trollface meme (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trollface>), but for most memes there is no identifiable creator and so no copyright can be claimed. However, more significantly, I also mean this in the broader sense that memes are floating and borderline empty signifiers, which can be endowed with whichever meaning a given community (in a very broad sense, as a decentralized collaborative discourse community, as in Tsakona 2020: 99) gives them, regardless of provenance, history, ideology, and even commonsense.

The maritime metaphor of jetsam works on another level as well: the floating signifiers are pushed about by currents, eddies, tides, and undertows; they may float to the surface or sink and be forgotten only to resurface when the flow is right. These motions are unpredictable, almost Brownian. (Brownian motion refers, originally, to random movements of pollen in water. It has been generalized to random motion in a fluid.) Yet, some general trends can be predicted, such as the tendency for memetic drift to tend to go in the direction of generic meanings and end in semantic bleaching.

Socially, these floating signifiers can have great significance. Trump’s victory in 2016 was widely attributed to memes. The current era has been characterized as “the meme wars” (Donovan et al. 2022) and in a war being able to alter a meme’s target is very helpful. The Dark Brandon meme was ultimately not enough to override the skepticism on Biden’s candidacy in 2024, but in societies that

increasingly rely on the internet for their political information, understanding, directing, and countering memes may turn out to be an essential skillset.

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