SPEAKING in the Language of Memes

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Meme, originated from the Selfish Gene (1976) of Dawkin to refer to the unit of culture, is now more popularly known as the "Internet Memes", a new language that takes over the Internet. This multimodal form of language might look weird and incomprehensible, but it is not as new as you thought. The human language itself has undergone a long history of pictorial expression since the ancient pictograph. In the Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) lacking body language, the Internet language evolves from emoticons :-), emojis ☺ to a more and more pictorial expression of memes . These visual elements are never simply a replacement of face-to-face utterances but are reconstructing the way of human communication.

Although memes are going viral as a communicative tool, there is not much research to study memes by placing them back into their original context. While most studies focus on a rather macro participatory media aspect, this study is inspired by the ethnographical SPEAKING model of Hymes (1974), emphasizing on contextualization to study memes as well as other forms of Internet language. The unique Western-Chinese hybrid Internet culture, as well as the bilingual niche, make Hong Kong young people the perfect informants to reveal the importance of a contextual and agentive

anthropological approach. This study specially established a Whatsapp group with 16 HK young meme users and 2 HK older non-meme users who did not know each other, inviting them to converse with memes. At the same time, this study also collected screenshots of daily meme conversation of the 16 meme users and underwent both online and face-to-face interviews with each of them. The individual screenshots demonstrated the grammar of memes, as well as the importance of language agency to the circulation and usage of memes. The group revealed another type of meme usage – meme game, in which they switched between Facebook, Weibo and HK Golden memes, not simply trying to defeat others but to continue the game, in order to build an online community.

How, why and what memes to choose highlights the identity, bonding, and rules of a community and reflect high individual agency in CMC. HK people's definition of memes can be very different from the Western majority one, and an anthropological approach is necessary to reveal a different angle. While Internet anthropology is still a rather new field, this study hopes to inspire on some new ethnographical method, as well as lighting on of the coming of age of the Internet as a future major field site.