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DOI : 10.32734/lwsa.v4i2.1192
Electronic ISSN : 2654-7066
Print ISSN : 2654-7058

Volume 4 Issue 2 – 2021 TALENTA Conference Series: Local Wisdom, Social, and Arts (LWSA)



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Humour in The Midst of Pandemic: Critical Discourse Analysis on Covid-19 Related Memes

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal the implicit meaning contained in memes related to Covid-19 through Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach. This meme is taken from social media and several websites that contain a collection of memes that are focused on pictures and writing in Indonesian and English. The results showed that through the text dimension, the macrostructure of the Covid-19 meme has four sub-themes, namely the naming of the coronavirus, wearing masks, violations of guarding distance, and rules of doing activities at home. The Covid-19 meme superstructure has four schemes, namely 1) a scheme starting from the main idea pattern followed by supporting ideas, 2) a scheme with a supporting idea pattern first then the main idea, 3) a scheme with the main idea pattern without supporting ideas and titles and 4) a visual scheme. Next, the Covid-19 meme microstructure consists of syntactic, semantic, stylistic, and graphic elements, which all elements are needed to show the form of sentences of causality, implicit meanings, comparative and satirical language styles, and the use of visual and written graphics for meme readers. Furthermore, through the dimension of social cognition, Covid-19 memes contain cognition or knowledge related to the Covid-19 pandemic conditions that are owned by meme-makers and meme readers. Finally, through the dimensions of the social context, the Covid-19 meme has a moral background and an indiscipline attitude towards health protocols, as well as trade and business competition due to the impact and influence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: covid-19; critical discourse analysis; humour; meme; pandemic

1. Introduction

As reported from Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia [1], memes are snippets of images from television shows, films, etc., or homemade images that are modified by adding words as a form of humorous expression with the aim of entertaining. The essence of memes is to spread a cultural idea or phenomenon, especially a phenomenon that is currently developing, namely the coronavirus outbreak which has become a world global pandemic. Many creative ideas have been made by the public regarding memes surrounding coronavirus outbreak. Memes that are created creatively by the public generally contain jokes, satire, and even sarcasm regarding issues that have gone viral and are phenomenal, such as the current case of the coronavirus pandemic. This is because jokes, satire, and sarcasm are sometimes an expression of emotion in the form of pleasure, sadness, or anger expressed in the form of images and accompanied by words to represent the feelings and intentions. On that basis, this study aims to reveal the implicit meaning contained in memes related to covid-19 through Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach.

Several studies related to memes through a critical discourse analysis approach have been carried out. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has several models, including the Norman Fairclough's CDA and Teun A. van Dijk's CDA. Meme-themed research using the Fairclough CDA approach was conducted by Handayani [2] and Andriani [3]. On the other hand, several meme-themed studies that using the Van Dijk's CDA model approach were conducted by Saleh [4], Savitri [5], and Sudarsono [6] - [8]. Saleh [4] discusses memes related to the black campaign for the governor election of DKI Jakarta in 2017, Savitri [5] describes memes about the discourse of social criticism expression on Indonesian sinetrons, and Sudarsono describes memes on various topics, such as the representation of Indonesia in a meme with the theme "Keindonesiaan" [6], representation of Indonesian society in hoax-themed memes [7], and images of women's dominance in memes with the theme of pacaran [8]. This study also discusses memes using the Van Dijk's CDA approach. However, in contrast to the research of Saleh [4], Savitri [5], and Sudarsono [6] - [8], this study describes a meme with the theme of the Covid-19 pandemic that has spread globally.

2. Method

The source of research data in the form of Covid-19 themed memes is taken randomly from internet media such as social media and several websites that contain a collection of memes, which are called internet memes. The subject of research data is in the form of pictures and words contained in memes in accordance with the definition of memes from Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia [1]. Data collection was carried out from March to July 2020 by collecting various memes, both Indonesian and English memes. Processing data using the observation method that is collected with the note-taking technique. This study uses two approaches, namely a qualitative descriptive methodological approach, and a theoretical approach to Teun A. van Dijk [9] which divides critical discourse analysis into three dimensions, namely 1) the text dimension includes macrostructures related to the text theme, superstructures related to schemes, and microstructures related to linguistic aspects; 2) the dimensions of social cognition include mental structures and the meaning process of the text maker, and 3) the dimensions of social context include the power and access that surrounds the background of making the text.

3. Result and Discussion

The results and analysis in this study are presented in accordance with the dimensions of Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, namely the text dimension, social cognition dimension, and social context dimension.

3.1. Text Dimension

Text dimension is a text structure dimension which consists of macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure.

3.1.1. Macrostructure

The macrostructure in a text provides general information about the theme of the text is raised. The overall theme raised in this study is the theme of the Covid-19 pandemic conditions. There are 22 meme images used in this study. Based on this data, the theme of the Covid-19 pandemic conditions has four sub-themes, namely the coronavirus naming, mask wearing, violations of social (physical) distancing, and stay at home's activities. Data classification based on sub-themes can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Covid-19 Pandemic Meme Data Based on Sub-Themes









Sub-Themes	Number of Memes	Meme Examples
The Coronavirus Naming	3	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 1</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 2</p> </div> </div>
Mask Wearing	8	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 3</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 4</p> </div> </div>
Violations of Social (Physical) Distancing	4	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 5</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 6</p> </div> </div>
Stay at Home's Activities	7	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 7</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Figure 8</p> </div> </div>

Table 1 shows that some examples of Covid-19 pandemic themed meme images have several sub-themes. Examples of Figures 1 and 2 with the theme of the coronavirus naming because the coronavirus first appeared in China, in a city called Wuhan, so that the coronavirus is considered to have been created in China as shown in Figure 1. In addition, it turns out that there are international beer brands which in yellow color, named Corona, so the name is similar to the name of the Coronavirus which became the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Next, the mask wearing that should be worn over the face covering the nose and mouth turns out to be used as a form of humor by being placed on the face over the eyes as shown in Figure 3 and placed behind the head as shown in Figure 4.

Furthermore, Figure 5 shows the violation of social (physical) distancing committed by Indonesia which is indicated by the number of vehicles close to each other. This is very inversely proportional to the three countries (the Philippines, Italy, and China represented by Wuhan) where there are no vehicles and human activities at all due to the lockdown. While Figure 6 is a pun on the motto of *bersatu kita teguh, bercerai kita runtuh* (being united we are steadfast, divorced we fall apart) which is manipulated to be *bersatu kita mati, bercerai kita selamat* (united we die,





4	Scheme with the main idea pattern without supporting ideas and titles		<p data-bbox="829 291 1061 336">Just seen someone post this on Facebook for fuck sake 🤔🤔</p> 	 <p data-bbox="1093 481 1372 526">SETELAH PANDEMI COVID-19 BERAKHIR DIANJURKAN UNTUK MEMAKAI MASKER SEPERTI INI SELAMA 2 BULAN, AGAR TELINGA ANDA KEMBALI KE POSISI SEMULA</p>
5	Visual scheme			

Table 2 shows that scheme 2 can be seen in Figure 3 with a sentence that reads “if you cannot see the Wuhan virus, you cannot get the Wuhan virus” as the main idea and added a clause that reads “only in Singapore” as a supporting idea. On the other hand, scheme 3 can be shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4, where the words as a supporting idea is placed first, arranged in the top position, then the main ideas are put later which are arranged in the lowest position, as shown in Figures 7 and 8 which is emphasized by words that written in yellow. Furthermore, scheme 4 can be seen in Figures 5, 6, and 7 whereas the words contained in the three memes is only one sentence which is the main idea and is added by the presence of an image to emphasize the words. What is interesting is that the only example of a meme image that does not include the entire existing scheme is Figure 8. The most prominent thing in meme Figure 8 is a picture or photo of street conditions in various corners of the city in various countries coupled with the word of the name of the country or city in the corner of the image or photo to indicate the location of the image or photo. Therefore, the scheme shown in Figure 8 can be called a visual scheme, because it is dominated by images rather than words.

3.1.3. Microstructure

Internet memes have a microstructure that is different from other discourse media such as magazine or newspaper articles, especially in terms of completeness of text in the form of words in memes. Text that is in a magazine or newspaper article has detailed semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and rhetorical elements in full. However, the text in memes does not have the completeness of these elements. The text in memes is very simple, which only consists of one or two sentences supported by an image. Therefore, the microstructural elements of Van Dijk's CDA have been adapted to the available data, namely syntactic, semantic, stylistic, and graphic elements. Before describing the microstructure elements one by one, here are examples of memes that use Indonesian and English which can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Covid-19 Pandemic Meme Data Based on the Language Used








Language Used	Meme Examples	
Indonesian language	 <p data-bbox="716 613 818 647">Figure 1</p>	 <p data-bbox="933 613 1037 647">Figure 2</p>
	 <p data-bbox="732 916 836 949">Figure 3</p>	 <p data-bbox="997 916 1101 949">Figure 4</p>
	 <p data-bbox="724 1196 829 1229">Figure 5</p>	 <p data-bbox="960 1196 1066 1229">Figure 6</p>
	English	 <p data-bbox="732 1532 836 1565">Figure 7</p>

Table 3 shows that differences in language usage show the order of words and sentences used. Broadly speaking, the word structure in Indonesian-language memes is longer as shown in Figures 3 and 4 than in English memes which tend to be shorter as in Figures 5 and 6, even in Figure 8 only four words are used as representatives of four countries and city. Syntactically, the sentence form used both in Indonesian language and in English memes is a form of causality or a sentence that contains cause and effect, as in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 7. In addition, most memes do not use conjunctions as shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, 6, and 8. What is interesting is the use of the sentence in the meme of Figure 3, which says *cukup rebahan di rumah saja kita sudah berkontribusi buat bangsa dan negara* (it is enough to lie at home, we have contributed to the nation and state). This sentence is included in the sentence of causality because there is an element of cause and effect in it, where the clause is *cukup rebahan di rumah saja* (simply lying at home) contains an element of the cause, while the clause *kita sudah berkontribusi bagi bangsa dan negara* (we have contributed to

the nation and state) becomes an element of effect. Even though it is included in the sentence of causality, the sentence does not need conjunction, because the meaning of cause and effect is already contained in it.

Semantically, memes with the theme of the Covid-19 pandemic show the meaning of information implicitly or indirectly. The selection of implicit information in memes is a form of communicator creativity so that memes look unique and interesting, as in Figure 2, 5, 6, and 8. In addition to aiming at making memes look unique and interesting, the intent of the four meme images is implicitly informed, so that readers can focus more on the visuals in the meme. Simplicity can be seen in Figure 8, where the meme of Figure 8 is focused on images or photos of street conditions in various corners of cities in various countries. From photos of contrasting conditions between Wuhan, Italy, and the Philippines with Indonesia, readers should be knew the implicit meaning contained in it. From several examples of these memes, in general, the substance of the memes is intended to insult the world community affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The substance of the satire has an important position in memes so that other elements such as language are largely ignored.

Stylistically, the strategy of conveying satire in memes can be seen through the use of straightforward and informal diction, so that it can reach all ages and backgrounds of readers. In addition, Covid-19 pandemic-themed memes have a unique style of communication by using various language styles. In addition to the satire language style as in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 7, these memes also use a comparative language style as shown in Figures 1, 2, 6, and 8. Comparisons are made to compare the similarities of the Corona brand beer name to the name coronavirus (Figure 6), different conditions between keeping your distance and not keeping your distance (Figures 1 and 8), and differences in physical conditions that are fit due to activities outside the home with a physical condition that is not fit due to just staying at home (Figure 2).

On the other hand, the use of satire language is intended so that the criticism conveyed is not too stiff, and the meaning contained in the meme can be conveyed to the reader. The memes in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 7 can be classified into two types of satire, namely positive satire, and negative satire. Positive satire is intended as subtle satire, while negative satire is a harsh satire for readers who are part of the community affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Of the four memes, the meme included in the positive satire is the meme in Figure 3 which means that lying down is a normal activity during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the meme in Figure 5 which means that all creations or products are produced from China, considered not going to last long. Conversely, the meme included in the negative satire is the meme in Figures 4 and 7 which is intended to insinuate the inappropriate use of masks, which should be used to cover the nose and mouth, not cover other parts of the head. Even so, the satirical language style in the meme intends to have a humorous effect, so that it is hoped that readers can accept critical ideas casually and with a positive impression.

The delivery of intent with a language pattern that tends to be free or without language rules, and is implicit has the risk of misperception by readers. To reduce this risk, memes are equipped with various graphic elements such as certain symbols which is gender symbols for men and women (Figure 1), pictures of fictional or non-fictional characters (Figures 2, 3, 4, and 7), pictures of cartoon characters (Figure 5), even pictures or photos under certain conditions (Figures 6 and 8). The use of images in accordance with the intended context aims to make meme readers have a complete perception.

3.2. Social Cognition Dimension

The whole perception possessed by meme readers can be known through the dimensions of social cognition which include mental structures and the meaning process of the meme creator. Memes made with the creativity of the creator must be based on the cognition or knowledge they have obtained from various information related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The information obtained is then processed by the meme creator to get meaning for the meme s/he made. This knowledge is what gives rise to creativity in making memes. However, the meaning of the creativity generated by the meme creator will not be known if the reader does not have the same knowledge as that of the meme creator. Therefore, general information is needed which is known to both meme creators and meme readers.

One of the information referred to is related to the covid-19 pandemic themed meme can be seen in the following examples of memes in Figure 1, 2, 3, and 4 below.



Figure 1

1 Hal positif yg bisa kita dapat ditengah maraknya virus Corona adalah



Figure 3



Figure 2



Figure 4

Figure 1 shows that when other countries have implemented lockdowns by staying at home and not doing activities outside the home, Indonesia continues to do activities without paying attention to health protocols. This can be seen from the chronology of the beginning of the first confirmed positive corona cases in each country, namely China at the end of December 2019 [10], Italy and the Philippines at the end of January 2020 [11] [12], and Indonesia in mid-February 2020 [13]. Since it was known that they were contaminated with the Coronavirus, the three countries, namely China, Italy and the Philippines, immediately carried out lockdowns in several cities, so that residents did not carry out outdoor activities and remained at home. On the other hand, Indonesia does not implement area closure, and people continue to carry out outdoor activities without realizing that danger will threaten at any time.

Figure 2 shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced humans to be far apart, because being close together will cause death. It can be seen that if someone is close to a person without a mask, the droplets (or saliva) will spread and infect other people who are nearby. Therefore, physical distancing is effective in reducing the spread of the coronavirus [14]. In addition, maintaining physical distance is not only for personal gain, but also affects other people in the environment [15].

Figure 3 shows that lying down is considered as one of the easiest and most effective ways that can help Indonesia in preventing the spread of the corona virus. It can be seen that lying down is one of the activities carried out at home, where staying at home is likely to get caught the Coronavirus will be small, because the chances of meeting or contact with other people will be few [16]. Although there are many other activities you can do at home besides lying down, lying down is the easiest activity that doesn't require energy and thought.

Figure 4 shows that studying and working at home as a form of covid-19 precaution resulted in physical changes within two weeks of self-isolation. It is understandable that with the regulation of Covid-19 preventive measures from the World Health Organization (WHO) [17] and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemenkes RI) [18], people are asked to do work and study activities at home intensively. Therefore, if people just stay at home for two weeks, it will result in physical changes for two weeks as represented by the character of the Thor. The two week period contained in this meme is interpreted as the incubation period of the coronavirus in the human body, namely for two weeks or 14 days.

It can be concluded that the results of the creativity of the four examples of memes in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 will not be visible if there is no cognition or knowledge possessed by both parties, both meme creators and meme readers. However, the knowledge or cognition possessed will always be accompanied by the social context behind the meme.

3.3. Social Context Dimension

The social context behind the meme is important because the dimensions of the social context include the power and access that surrounds the background for making the meme. The power in question is the power to influence meme readers, while the access in question is access to information in making memes. The social context that underlies memes can be seen in the examples of memes in Figure 5, 6, 7, and 8 below.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figures 5 and 6 show the social context background in the form of morals and disciplinary attitudes towards one of the health protocols, namely maintaining physical distance. Figure 5 shows the condition of the closure of areas in several countries, where there is no community activity outside the home even on the streets. This is inversely proportional to the condition in Indonesia where there are many vehicles close together as an indication of traffic jams due to the absence of government closure. The condition of Indonesia as shown in Figure 5 shows that the Indonesian people are considered not disciplined in carrying out health protocols. The condition shown by this meme is a harsh insinuation for the Indonesian people, so that meme Figure 6 appears which is considered a warning. Figure 2 shows that the motto *bersatu kita teguh dan bercerai kita runtuh* (our united is steadfast and our divorce has collapsed) into irrelevance during the Covid-19 pandemic. This makes meme-creators use the motto to slip it into *bersatu kita mati bercerai kita selamat* (unity, we die divorce, we survive). The slipping of a motto in a meme is relevant because the meme is made to satire and warn the public to comply with health protocols by keeping their distance.

Figures 7 and 8 show the social context background in the form of business competition in the economy. This can be seen clearly in the meme 7, which has the cartoon character Lisa Simpson from The Simpson family. Those who are interested in The Simpson cartoon series must know that The Simpson cartoon is a fictional character created by animators from the United States. Meanwhile, as written in meme Figure 7, namely “the coronavirus won't last long because it was made in China” implies that Lisa Simpson, representing the United States, looks like it is cornering China as the country where the coronavirus first appeared, so it is considered a “creator” of coronavirus. The relationship between the United States and China has been heating up for a long time, especially when the United States was under President Donald Trump's leadership, the bilateral relations between the two countries were heating up in all fields, especially in the trade and economy sectors. Therefore, the United States builds the perception and assumption that any creation or product produced or appearing in China will not last long, so that consumers will not buy any products originating from China.

Conversely, Figure 8 shows that there are two types of bottles of different colors, where the green bottle refers to the Heineken brand and the yellow bottle refers to the Corona brand. Heineken is an international beer brand

originating from the Netherlands that has been recognized by the world beer connoisseur, while Corona is an overseas beer brand originating from Mexico. Figure 8 shows that Heineken beer looks like it is moving away from Corona beer, because of the similarity in the name Corona brand beer which is associated with the coronavirus naming. As a result of the similarity in name, it appears that Heineken beer is fitted with a mask so that it does not get the "virus" from Corona beer. This implies that there is the business competition between the two beers, with the Heineken beer looking like it wants to "drop" the Corona beer due to the name sticking to the beer. Therefore, Heineken beer builds the perception and assumption that drinking Corona beer will contract the Coronavirus so that consumers don't buy Corona beer.

It can be concluded that the social context based on the example of meme in Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8 shows the moral background and indiscipline attitude towards health protocols, as well as trade and business competition between the two countries and the two certain companies due to the impact and influence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Conclusion

From the results and discussions that have been previously described, it can be concluded that memes related to Covid-19 can be traced through three dimensions of discourse according to Van Dijk's CDA. Through the text dimension, the macrostructure of the Covid-19 memes has four sub-themes, namely the coronavirus naming, mask wearing, violations of social (physical) distancing, and stay at home's activities. The Covid-19 meme superstructure has four schemes, namely 1) a scheme starting from the main idea pattern followed by supporting ideas, 2) a scheme with a supporting idea pattern first then followed by the main idea, 3) a scheme with the main idea pattern without supporting ideas and titles, and 4) a visual scheme. Next, the Covid-19 meme microstructure consists of syntactic, semantic, stylistic, and graphic elements, where all elements are needed to show sentence forms of causality, implicit meanings, comparative and satirical language styles, and the use of visual and written graphics for meme readers. After the text dimension, through the social cognition dimension, Covid-19 memes contain cognition or knowledge related to the Covid-19 pandemic conditions that are owned by both parties, both meme creators and meme readers. Finally, through the dimensions of the social context, the Covid-19 meme has a moral background and an indiscipline attitude towards health protocols, as well as trade and business competition between the two countries and certain companies due to the impact and influence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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