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Resisting "Let's Eat Grandma": The Rhetorical Potential of Grammar Memes

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Abstract

Analysis of 50 grammar memes through the lenses of participatory culture on social media and classical topoi reveals that most grammar memes resist the growing and progressive position that a wide range of Englishes exist and their usage is acceptable. These traditionalist grammar memes perpetuate beliefs about the use of correct English by making claims of superiority. Meanwhile, backlash memes do not take an overt stand against traditionalist grammar arguments when they veer into exclusion and racism. I argue that teachers and students of Writing, English, and English Education should explore more inclusive memes in regards to contemporary language changes and that memes based on a narrative mode of instruction would expand the topoi of grammar memes that exist, interrupting a main two-way argument that dominates the grammar internet subculture today.

Keywords: Meme; macro meme; grammar meme; rhetorical invention; participatory social media

Introduction

Grammar memes of the type represented by the popular "Let's Eat Grandma" meme are ubiquitous, especially for a teacher of Writing, English, or English Education. In addition to their presence online, iterations of the same jokes and puns about grammar misuse and errors are found on mugs, t-shirts, and print-outs of memes on bulletin boards and writing center walls. Many iterations of grammar memes exist, but they offer critique on or express frustration with a comparatively few grammar concepts — mainly spelling, punctuation, and confused words such as to, two, and too. In other words, grammar memes reiterate reactions to the same grammar errors in their remixes and derivations. "Let's eat grandma" alone exists in upwards of a dozen variations in the wording of the joke and the image over which the words appear.

This is characteristic of memes, of course. As is often cited, the concept of the meme as a cultural counterpart to the gene, a way to describe how cultural practices and ideas evolve, was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* and elucidated since by Dawkins and other culture and philosophy theorists. Today the word also names the digital images or videos that are shared and replicated on the internet in various permutations to make jokes, political statements, or arguments. This study concerns image macros in particular, the type of meme composed

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of a static image such as a photo or cartoon with a changeable humorous, ironic, or pointed caption. Kate Brideau and Charles Berret (2014) offer this definition:

> an image macro consists of text script superimposed over an image. In this genre, the particular background image tends to remain fairly constant within the meme; it is the text script that users continually modify. This text script is most often written using an all-capital block font known as Impact, now closely associated with memes" (p. 309).

Image macros make the rounds on the internet in various and recapitulated forms, especially thanks to meme-making sites such as Memes.com or Imagechef.com. These sites house stock photos over which the user can type in their own caption and download or otherwise share the finished product easily.

This article takes up image macros regarding the subject of grammar specifically, and I refer to them throughout as "grammar memes." The exigence for this study is my own ambivalence toward grammar memes. I teach our university's English Grammar class for future secondary education teachers. From that stance, I was a few years ago interested in finding "neutral" grammar memes which simply expressed an appreciation or affinity for grammar that did not also correct or shame others. My best effort to date is an image of M.C. Hammer dancing that says "Stop! Grammar Time" (Fig. 1). It is sufficiently "neutral," but it is also in the minority of grammar memes, most of which take a position on the importance of correct grammar usage.

Out of this experience grew a curiosity with the range and seeming conversation occurring within and among grammar memes. My research questions were thusly formed: 1) What range of purposes exist among grammar memes? 2) What experiences and emotions do shame-based grammar memes seem to address? 3) How do grammar memes reflect approaches and attitudes to teaching grammar?

To address these questions, I analyzed 50 common grammar memes, including "Let's Eat Grandma," which helped me come to new understandings of internet memes generally and insights into the potential of grammar memes in particular. My analysis is framed by two concepts: classical rhetorical *topoi* and the notion of participatory culture. As I will demonstrate, Aristotle's *topoi* and its contemporary critiques help to account for the use of memes to make arguments about grammar (the how), and Jenkins' notion of participatory culture helps to account for grammar memes' various positions on English language use (the what).

My analysis reveals that most grammar memes resist the growing and progressive position that a wide range of Englishes exist and their usage is acceptable. Establishing this growing acceptance as a "mainstream" in the internet grammar subculture helps explain why there are more memes that take intolerance for grammar error to extremes, such as using Nazi symbols, than there are memes that resist the ostensible mainstream of the culture-at-large: the ages-old traditional views of what constitutes good English and grammar.

Fig. 1. MC hammer grammar time meme.

Based on these findings, I suggest that teachers and students of Writing, English, and English Education should participate in the internet grammar subculture and create two new types of grammar memes, which will be explained presently. Such creations would resist mainstream attitudes about English in two ways. First, more inclusive memes in regards to contemporary language changes would diversify the perspectives on correct English language use currently represented on the internet. Second, memes based on a narrative mode of instruction would expand the rhetorical types of grammar memes that exist, interrupting a main two-way argument that dominates the grammar internet subculture today.

Memes and Participatory Culture

Internet memes are rhetorical

In her 1999 book, *The Meme Machine*, Susan Blackmore articulates a theory of memes inspired by Dawkins as a counterpart to genes, a way of explaining the spread of ideas, practices, and concepts. Where genes explain the physical aspects of human biology, memes explain the conceptual aspects of human culture. Common examples of memes are things like melodies, jokes, or theories — all ideas or concepts that are shared through language. The idea of comparing memes to genes is that those memes that are replicated the most because of certain characteristics will survive, influence, and be imitated — and therefore continue to spread and flourish. The idea of natural selection is therefore applied to culture as it is to biology.

Richard Dawkins (2016) identified those certain characteristics that a meme needs to survive and flourish as fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (Dawkins p. 21; Blackmore, p. 57). There's not any real accounting for content, so whatever the content of a meme — whether a sex joke or an alien abduction myth — the meme needs to be memorable (fidelity), able to spread rapidly through various means and technologies (fecundity), and last over time (longevity). Examples such as sex jokes are of the type that fit these three characteristics, and yet it's hard to say how they have persisted, exactly, across multitudes of people, cultures, technologies, and eons. Their continued replication is what makes them memes.

Internet memes such as videos and image macros display the characteristics of fidelity, fecundity, and longevity when they are replicated again and again. They are digital versions of Dawkins' idea: "eyeworms," so to speak. Shifman's excellent 2011 analysis of 30 of the most popular YouTube videos attempted to name the qualities that make memetic videos most replicated. Shifman explained the difference between a meme's popularity in terms of being shared, or going viral, and its popularity in terms of being imitated, or becoming memetic:

> While the 'humor' attribute of such videos may evoke positive emotions that enhance spreadability, the other attributes found in this study may be associated more readily with the tendency to imitate content than with the inclination to share it. This contrast may suggest, more generally, that the study of memetic diffusion needs to be sensitive to distinctive modes of communicating with texts. Decisions about diffusion are not only genre-dependent, but also action-dependent: what people tend to share differs from what they decide to become involved with through imitation. (Shifman, 2011, p. 199)

Shifman found that a video's rhetorical mode, such as parody, mash-up, and pastiche, more often accounted for a meme's popularity to be reproduced, rather than its content or quality. Joshua Daniel-Wariya (2016) also considered "rhetorical forms of expression likes memes and avatars" in his analysis of the "lame pun coon," a raccoon macro whose captions have included "Velcro? What a rip off" (p. 45). With this example, Daniel-Wariya compared the industrial era logic of standardization and mass production to the digital era logic of customization. He argued that the appeal of playing on social media is in the ability to customize digital products of whatever, even trivial, consequence.

These findings suggested that internet memes' messages are no more important than the memetic qualities themselves. Macros memes in particular are rhetorical in their capacity to transmit both their messages and themselves as forms, like frames for a message. To the frame, a person adds content regarding some subject or another, such as a President, major league baseball, or grammar. Considering memes as frames suggests the classical inventional method of the *topoi*, which asks a rhetor to pair a frame for possible arguments (definition, cause and effect, opposition, etc.) with subject matter — what Aristotle called material (Aristotle, 2007, p. 161). Where the two converge becomes one's argument, theoretically.

Contemporary critics of the *topoi* suggest that the method has been reduced in its generative potential over time in two related ways. First, concern is voiced about the divorce between the *topoi's* function as a tool of producing arguments for the express purpose of political participation. Michael Leff (2006) and David Fleming (2003) each explain how the focus of the *topoi* shifted from an exercise to steep rhetoric students in the political concerns of their communities to a rote academic exercise devoid of context. A second point of contention relates to the *topoi's* role in academics. James Crosswhite (2014) suggests that the *topoi* have been used more frequently as a critical thinking tool useful in analysis of texts rather than for practice in the production of rhetorical arguments (p. 197).

The most relevant critique to this study is that the *topoi* does not adequately explain when the use of the frames moves from invention to argument. Crosswhite argues that the more time spent dwelling in the potential arguments offered by the *topoic* frames, the better; on the other hand, when one settles on an argument that might carry water, is the claim supplied by the *topoi* now an argument? Take "cause and effect" for an example. If, having gone through some of the *topoi's* logics, I find that, indeed, my best argument is that A caused B, has the *topoi* morphed into an enthymeme? Was the *topoi* an empty enthymeme, devoid of material? It didn't exist before the *topoi* was employed, so perhaps not.

In other words, the relationship between the structure and the material is not clearly drawn. To address this inadequacy, Fleming notes that Vico wrote of "third terms" and Toulmin of "warrants" to illuminate the underlying premise of enthymemes, once created. Fleming suggests that, rather than the combination of material and structure, it is the warrant, the link between the *topoi* and the argument, that is invention (p. 102).

I suggest that image macros memes demonstrate well the roles of frame and content in adding up to or transforming into a claim or argument. These memes' ease of replication, their visual nature, their humor, and their "cultural approval," so to speak, draws the audience's attention to rhetorical structures, frames, in a way we know is harder with text. Rhetoric's traditional shady reputation is predicated on the fact that understanding and analyzing political speeches and propaganda is sometimes beyond the average audience member. Even if a speechmaker uses well-known *topoi* like comparison, for instance, there can be much more to parse in a single text than in a single meme. The meme-as-frame represents a ready-made reaction or emotion that has been culturally approved, as evidenced by the longevity of any number of examples of memes. The frame has become an expression in its own right that an audience will accept and understand. As an example, take the Captain Picard "Why the Hell" macros: the frame is already an expression of frustration and exasperation, recognized and imitated by users to share that particular reaction to something. Add to it the personalized content of a topic such as a grammatical error, and an argument with cultural relevance and rhetorical force results.

Resistance in participatory culture

I establish this understanding of the "how" of memes to move into a discussion of the "what," the arguments they convey online by considering Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and Danah Boyd's (2016) notion of participatory culture, or the cultural practices of groups such as fandoms or other subcultures, both off and on the internet (p. 4). There are two important dimensions of this notion which correspond with memes' arguments: diversity and democracy of voices and resistance to the mainstream.

First, Jenkins' et al definition of participatory culture relies on diversity and democracy (p. 2). This is participation in its most open and optimistic form, with access and a chance for anyone to share their perspectives. Many studies of digital rhetorics point in this direction, with everyday people using memes to protest mainstream entities, such as corporate interests or the government.

For one, Heidi E. Huntington (2016) provides an example of resistance against both the government and the media with the use of macros during the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). In particular, Huntington discussed the meme "Pepper Spray Cop," which began with a photo of a police officer pepper-spraying protestors in a seemingly nonchalant way at UC-Davis on November 18, 2011. The next day, the photo was shared on Reddit, and appropriations began appearing soon thereafter. Variations of Pepper Spray Cop included, for one example, the officer walking through the painting "Declaration of Independence," and spraying while Thomas Jefferson signs the Declaration (see Fig. 2). Responding to the idea that memes are a "shallow practice," Huntington noted that Pepper Spray Cop drew attention to the university police at UC-Davis to an audience much larger than the one reached by mainstream media news outlets (p. 87).

Geoffrey V. Carter and Sarah J. Arroyo (2011) similarly positioned memetic videos as politically subversive in their "tubing" pedagogy, where sharing memetic videos on YouTube is a way of extending a traditional focus on

Fig. 2. Pepper spray cop with the Declaration meme.

cultural critique to future-focused pedagogy of production (p. 299). They suggested that this participatory pedagogy "offers a way to critique and perform simultaneously" (p. 299). As an example, they recounted the memes inspired by Alaska's Republican Senator Ted Stevens' notorious comment that the internet is a "series of tubes." The remixes and repurposed versions of the comment reflect resistance to the mainstream by critiquing a government leader's fitness to serve on a committee regarding the Internet. Carter and Arroyo described this type of provocation of the status quo as a "counter narrative," especially when, in the Senator Stevens example, users' takes on Senator Stevens got as much or more attention and opportunity for engagement with other citizens than did the mainstream media, which would have reported the Senator's words without critique (p. 299).

While these are inspiring examples of resistance, Jenkins et al note openness cannot exclude diverse positions that are not, as Jenkins et al put it, "making the world a better place" (p. 10). For example, "pro-ana" collectives devoted to creating guides for how to be anorexic and supporting a pro-anorexia lifestyle comprise the type of subculture and its participatory practices that "count" in participatory culture even if it's a patently dangerous position for a person to take. Edbauer's 2005 study of the "Keep Austin Weird" campaign also exemplifies a diversity of voices, progressive or not. The slogan raised the voice of small business owners in the debate about changes to Austin's business economy. It also outlasted its role as an argument against corporate interests and developed memetic qualities when it was coopted by those who simply opposed the original message ("Keep Austin Normal") and by corporate marketers ironically coopting the phrase to sell cell phones (p. 18-19).

Jenkins et al also make the case that in the fragmented nature of the internet, perhaps no unified mainstream even exists (p. 14). The relative visibility and competition for attention among so many perspectives and subcultures on Web 2.0 lends to the contemporary scenario in which multiple truths supercede a unified Truth. The tension between what Jenkins et al calls "personalization" (the individual's own interest) and "socialization" (competing attention with others' interests) skew the perception of what constitutes the mainstream. Users can therefore see and ignore what they want of the world on the internet. This state of being on the internet today has recently been described in our culture as "bubbles." The implications of living in one's own internet "bubble" have been duly discussed in regards to a segment of voters who were blindsided by the 2016 election results, to take a poignant example.

In this fragmented yet networked reality, one implication relevant to the present discussion of grammar memes is that it is possible for users to see themselves as rebels against a mainstream, even as they argue in *favor* of the mainstream. Accordingly, the "what" of the majority of grammar memes is an argument that clings to traditional beliefs about using English and its grammar correctly. Since I would call this a mainstream belief, what exactly do these arguments resist?

Methodoloy

Data Collection

To connect the understanding of participatory social media and the *topoic*-nature of macros memes as colloquialized manifestations of the Dawkinsian elements of fidelity, fecundity, and longevity, I sought to consider a broad collection of grammar memes, rather than many iterations of a single meme, which seems more often to be the norm in studies of

Table 1
Category Examples.

Category	Example
Confused or misspelled words	Your/You're: The difference between knowing your shit and knowing you're shit.
Apostrophes used to make words plural	Someone uses an apostrophe to make a word plural. . . cry for hours.

similar digital artifacts (see, for instance, Carter & Arroyo, 2011 as well as Gries, 2013). So, while the memes of interest to this study center around the topic of grammar, I looked for as many "statements" as possible, and welcomed those, like M.C. Hammer, with messages beyond the mean-spiritedness that had annoyed me so, as well as other statements and arguments that I did not anticipate.

Specifically, to collect memes, I relied on Google image search, and I used a variety of search terms, including "grammar memes" "grammar error memes" "grammar mistake memes" "bad grammar memes," "grammar joke memes," and other variations. These initially found some of the more popular and well-known macros, such as Captain Picard asking "Why the hell. . .?" I also began reaching some collections of memes I hadn't encountered before, including the array of grammar nazi memes, which brandish a stylized swastika-G, a feature discussed below. Once I learned of the array of grammar nazi memes and images, I used that term and derivations thereof as well.

The nature of memes lends to the repetition of certain phrases and jokes over differing image macros. So, I cataloged the memes by phrase or joke, and I did not double-count memes with the same message and differing images. In the end, I collected 50 unique memes, feeling that each new meme I encountered repeated a similar joke or point made by a previously found example. The 50 memes are listed in Appendix I.

I initially began to sort the memes by their grammatical concern; for instance, "Let's Eat Grandma" is fundamentally about the punctuation of the sentence and the resulting role of the word "grandma." Incorrectly punctuated, grandma is the direct object. Correctly punctuated, it is a noun of direct address, a vocative. There is another joke like this in the sentence "I like cooking my pets and my friends." In this case, the missing commas suggest that the three things that are "liked" are complements and not, respectively: a verb complement and two direct objects. In that case, one might argue about the logic of those three items as a series to begin with; still, the emphasis is on the missing commas in the series.

However, these grammatical categories offered little else besides explaining the joke. Further, there are only a handful of grammatical terms at issue. Besides grammatical play with missing commas, I happened mainly upon two other distinct grammatical categories: commonly confused and misspelled words and using apostrophes for plurals. Table 1 below provides examples of these categories.

Although there are a proliferation of memes attending to this handful of grammar concerns, further collection and categorization alerted me to the purpose and argument of the memes as more significant. Purpose served as a more generative organizational heuristic, allowing memes to be compared and analyzed based on their argument, rather than the specific grammar concepts they bemoan, which, as I note, are relatively few. Taken this way, grammar memes reveal themselves as a conversation, an internet subculture that trades arguments, counterarguments, and meta-arguments about grammar usage, concern about grammar useage, and the use of memes in regards to a debate about grammar usage. Eventually, I sorted and re-sorted the 50 memes into five main purposes, listed in Table 2 below and analyzed in the following section.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are twofold. First, the nature of memes as digital artifacts that are easily replicable, shared, or deleted means that I cannot see them all. Even as late into this study as the writing of this article, I can search for a specific grammar concept mentioned here and find a new variation of a corresponding meme. Even so, I find that even the newest or most obscure memes are still generally categorizable by their purposes, which align with the spirit of at least one the purposes recorded here.

Second, I would like readers to know that my treatment of the idea and symbols of nazism in grammar memes is limited. On the one hand, this collection of grammar memes drew my attention and my disgust, and I do therefore examine the use of the phrase "grammar nazi" and the swastika-G symbol within the analysis of grammar memes. On the other hand, readers may find my treatment too brief. Clearly, more research is warranted on the origin, popularity,

Table 2
Purposes and Arguments of Grammar Memes with Examples.

Purpose/Argument	Example
Claims of superiority	I am not a grammar snob. I am smart.
Mockery of poor grammar and users	Every time I see someone type "to funny," I picture them, fist in the air, going on a quest "to funny."
Grammar naziism	Your incorrect grammar has awoken my inner nazi.
Backlash against grammar correction	I just blocked someone who corrected my grammar and it feeled so good.
Narrative illustration of grammar	The zombies are THERE. THEIR limbs are falling off. THEY'RE going to eat us.

and backlash of the phrase "grammar nazi," both in the pre-internet era and in the current digital landscape, as well as the origin of the swastika-G design.

Analysis of Grammar Memes

As noted above, five categories of purpose and argument emerged in the grammar meme collection. In this analysis, I explain the arguments as they relate and respond to each other. Generally speaking, traditionalist grammar memes perpetuate long-held beliefs about the use of correct English by making claims of superiority of varying degrees of meanness. Meanwhile, backlash memes mainly suggest that that attitude is obnoxious, although many do not take an overt stand against traditionalist grammar arguments that veer into exclusion and racism.

Traditionalist Grammar Memes

The first three purposes or arguments noted are claims of superiority, mocking of grammar misuse; and extreme expressions of strictness or nazism regarding grammar. I take these three together as a general category of traditionalist grammar memes, which range from the subtle and ironic to the blatant and no-holds-barred.

Take the example in Table 2: "I am not a grammar snob. I am smart." This meme uses a bit of a non-sequitur to link the concepts of 1) knowing grammar but not correcting others (as a "snob" would) and 2) being smart. The unstated premise is that knowing grammar well isn't a negative quality, but actually among the top positive human qualities. There a defensive note to this meme.

On the other hand, other examples are less abashed in their claims of superiority. Consider the meme "I don't judge people based on race, color, or creed. I judge them based on grammar, spelling, and punctuation." Or, over an image of a couple breaking up, a woman says to a man, "It's not you. It's your grammar." Here, we have grammarians who are prizing their own grammar abilities over relationships with others. In the "judge" meme, there is an unwillingness to interact with new people should their grammar be deficient; in the "it's not you" meme, grammar is a relationship deal-breaker.

Closely related to claims of superiority are a common purpose of grammar memes: mocking or otherwise belittling either the errors in grammar people make or the people themselves. There is also a range of bitingness in these memes. On the less cutting end, we have the example in Table 2: "Whenever someone writes 'to funny,' I picture them on a quest 'to funny!'" As previously noted, this meme relies on the commonly confused pair of to/too, but it also positions the person who would confuse these words as not knowing the effect of their error. I suggest that the "quest" meme stretches the illogic of using a preposition with an adjective like "funny" pretty far to make the joke. It is meaningful to a far smaller audience than the audience who would not understand "to funny." Of course, that is one of the reasons that grammar memes, especially ones that nitpick at parts of speech, are appealing: they allow those who notice errors to share the joke.

While a joke about a quest is pretty light-hearted, another example in the mocking category takes a different tone when usage is judged improper based on dialect and in particular, the Black English Vernacular (BEV) of a real person. For instance, consider the meme: "Improper grammar? There isn't anyone who has time for that." This meme offers a critique of the grammar of BEV based on the 2012 viral video of Kimberly Wilkins. Wilkins is an Oklahoma City woman, who, in K. Querry's (2012) news interview about a fire, explained how the fire affected her health, saying "ain't nobody got time for that." The distinctive phrase and its emphatic delivery spurred an auto-tune parody remix.

This video and phrase became well known, and it is arguably part of the cultural lexicon today. The meme takes up the phrase in a way that corrects and, it might be said, whitens it. The effect of doing so is to provide commentary on BEV and label it as "incorrect grammar."

Memes with the dual purposes of claiming superiority in knowing good grammar and mocking or shaming those who don't spring from similar points of view about grammar usage: that deficiency in grammar is related to a deficiency in the person. This is an ages-old point of view on writing ability traceable to a belle-lettres tradition that valued clear thinking and clear writing, or "perspicuity" as promoted by rhetoricians like Blair (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 951).

A queasy extension of the judgment of people's worth is reflected in the collection of grammar nazi memes. The phrase grammar nazi and its accompanying symbolism, including the swastika-G and even figures such as Hitler wearing nazi uniforms, are common among traditionalist grammar memes. This category dovetails with claims of superiority, but the effect on social relationships operates a bit differently than the abovementioned effects on future or current relationships. Memes in this category take the extra step of identifying one's self as a grammar nazi or, in the case of the example in Table 2, "Your incorrect grammar has awoken my inner nazi," simply a nazi[1] .

There are two ways one can interpret this version of the traditionalist grammar argument: on the one hand, one might take the perspective of a meme creator who is probably not thinking critically about this choice of figure or symbol and who is using the popularized definition of "nazi" to mean "ultimate evil." On the other hand, the claim of superiority positions the grammarian as a superior person in a specific and troubling historical way. While one may think that is taking the use of the word too literally, consider an instance where the concept of the grammar meme is taken at face value, even by those who would push against the claim of superiority inherent in the concept of nazi-as-extremist. Such an instance occurs with the meme: "If I'm always being attacked by grammar nazis, does that make me a grammar Jew?" This sideways critique of grammar naziism draws attention to the logic that undergirds the choice of dubbing oneself a "nazi": there is an unstated though pretty easily identified oppressed counterpart.

Backlash memes

Backlash memes respond to grammar shaming and grammar nazism in several, gradually more overt ways: First, they often countermand a traditionalist grammar position by using errors for rhetorical effect and to elicit an emotional effect on would-be grammar shamers. Two such examples include:

> "I just blocked someone who corrected my grammar and it feeled so good."
> "Theiy're: Take that grammar nazis."

Second, backlash memes might highlight the social consequences of correcting people's grammar as critique of such behavior. One meme focuses on the effect grammar correction and/or shaming will have on building and maintaining relationships:

> Willy Wonka macro: "Oh, you like to correct people's grammar? Tell me about all the friends you have."

A third strategy of backlash occurs when memes take on the notion of using memes to correct or instruct people in grammar in the first place. These "metamemes" offer a send-up of the purpose and earnestness of meme creators who use memes to point out incorrect grammar:

> "I only like a meme if the grammar are correct."
> Neo from *The Matrix* macro: "What if I told you. . . you could learn English basics through memes?"

These backlash memes, in their way, resist the traditionalist grammar memes' insistence on perfect English. While this is the side of the argument that I myself am on, I believe these memes fall short in addressing the underlying premises of the traditionalist grammar memes' argument – a conservative position about which Englishes count. Backlash memes do not overtly resist traditionalist views on English grammar and usage, and it could be said that the

[1] The origin of the phrase "grammar nazi" on the internet is attributed by *Know Your Meme* to a 1995 post titled "Grammar Nazi on the Rampage!" on the site alt.gothic. Other informal internet sources seem to agree with this dating, which generally follows the origin of the word "nazi" as hyperbole for an overly strict person, according to the OED (2018). Examples of journalistic uses of the phrase as a shortened version of National Socialists appear in 1930, while documentation of the word to suggest an exaggerated adherence to a dogma appears in 1982 (OED "Nazi").

backlash position is actually the progressive and therefore more controversial one. Adherence to Standard English has been the educational goal and norm a lot longer than a more open stance toward dialect and Englishes, plural. To those of us who know a multifaceted story about how English has been taught historically, the grammar-shamer is arguing from rote dogma.

On the other hand, perhaps counterintuitively, traditionalist grammar memes may be said to be resistant in their own right: they resist contemporary, liberal approaches to teaching English that embrace diversity and respect the variety of traditions among English speakers such as BEV, World Englishes, and other dialects besides Standard English. This emphasis has been evolving for some time in Writing, English, and English Education: for instance, the white paper "Students' Rights to their Own Language" was published in 1974. Additionally, respect for diverse language use appears in such position statements as the NCTE English Language Standards for K-12 (1996) and the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 (2014).

Of course, there are people party to this conversation who continue to value only perfect Standard English, and, in the case of light-hearted mocking, are simply showing off to their peers that they themselves are excellent grammarians who get irked by repeated errors. Further down the spectrum, mocking memes with racist overtones resist what may be seen as an overly PC culture and double down on the traditional point of view about English usage.

Narrative/Instructional memes

If backlash memes begin to poke fun at the relative usefulness of memes to teach English basics, we look finally to a category which offers a rhetorical shift in the purpose of grammar memes: from argument to narrative. These memes reflect actual attempts to teach grammar, rather than point out, complain about, or mock grammar errors. There are very few, and I have succeeded in finding only two that are passable in terms of illuminating a grammar concept. Both memes try to distinguish between commonly confused and misspelled words:

> "Alot is not a word. You wouldn't write alittle, abunch, acanteloupe, a porkchop, so don't write alot."
> "The zombies are THERE.
> THEIR limbs are falling off.
> THEY'RE going to eat us."

The tone of "alot" is slightly snider than "zombies," but both employ a bit of a different technique than similar, mocking memes that address commonly confused and misspelled words such as "Grammar: The difference between knowing your shit and knowing you're shit." In the first place, neither "alot" nor "zombies" insult the grammar mis-user. And, though "alot" comes close to the pattern apparent in "The difference," the placement of the letter "a" in front of the list of random nouns is perhaps more illustrative of the problem with spelling a lot as one word than the meaning of "your shit" versus "you're shit," which may still be lost on an unknowing writer.

Different still is the narrative mode of the "zombies." This meme uses "there, their, and they're" in sentences that not only offer contextual cues, but also add up to a greater meaning in the simply story it tells: escaping the zombies. The chance of illuminating the definitions of the confused words seems greater in this approach. A final characteristic that lends to "zombie's" ethos of helpfulness is the positioning of the meme creator and the audience as a team, an "us."

Of course, these friendlier instructional memes are still on the side of correct grammar usage. Do they assume that is the best or only acceptable approach to English? Perhaps. Still, the grammar misuser is not the subject of the meme, and therefore these narrative memes are distinct from those in the superiority and backlash categories and from the argument altogether. In that way, they offer a new *topoi* for creating grammar memes, a use for which I explain more fully below.

Conclusions

Pedagogical Implications

I offer both pedagogical and methodological implications for this study, beginning with a suggestion for teachers and students of Writing, English, and English Ed: to participate more robustly in the internet grammar subculture in two ways. The first way, in the spirit of representation, is to make memes that change the material of grammar memes

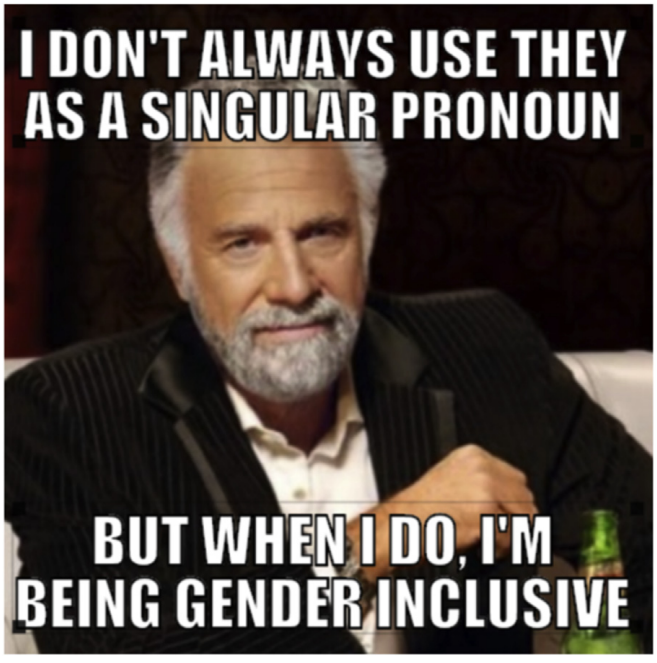

Fig. 3. The most interesting man in the world meme with change in rhetorical material.

in the Aristotelian sense, diversifying the perspectives on English usage on the internet today. This would be a diversity of the "what."

A current point of entry is the acceptance of the singular "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun, a meme of which would reply politically to some of the narrower treatments of usage typical in grammar memes. This focus would also expand the identity and role of the "grammar gurus" represented on the internet.

Fig. 3 is one attempt at capitalizing on the "Most interesting man in the world" meme in service of a progressive agenda for the teaching of English and grammar in the 21st century. This example relies on the ready-made frames that I have argued display well memes' rhetorical and *topoic* nature. In this case, I have used the culturally approved joke derived from a Dos Equis beer ad as a way to deliver new material and resist the mainstream: an argument for acceptance of the singular they. This type of meme expands grammar memes' representational aspect only. It stays within the bounds of the current grammar meme collection, rhetorically speaking. It changes the material, not the frame.

On the other hand, my second suggestion is to also change the frame, or the "how" of grammar memes with an expansion of the narrative/instructional *topoi*. This would diversify grammar memes rhetorically and exemplify Carter & Arroyo's "tubing" pedagogy, which is both a pedagogy and rhetorical act that "critiques and performs simultaneously" (p. 299). Applied to this situation, narrative/instructional grammar memes resist the dominant position on English on the internet as explained above and the rhetorical dominance of the existing two-way argument altogether.

In imagining an expansion of the narrative/instructional meme, Fig. 4 provides an example using the well-known "Be Like Bill" meme, which is often created to offer sarcastic yet logical solutions to small or seemingly obvious problems. For instance, a typical Be Like Bill meme might read: "This is Bill. Bill sees something on the internet that offends him. Bill moves on. Be Smart. Be like Bill." Drawing on the cadence and general rhetorical mode of narrative in a Be Like Bill meme, my example attempts to offer grammatical information and illuminate the distinction between it's and its. Rather than perpetuate an engagement with the back and forth argument surrounding the usefulness or advisability of memes, this meme, although not perfectly in keeping with the Be Like Bill conventions, changes the approach. While the backlash memes are clever and hopeful in terms of their statements again other memes' dominant attitudes about English usage, they are limited in their advocacy for a variety of English language users or in their usefulness for actual grammar information.

In my experience teaching apprentice high school teachers how to teach grammar, there is room for increasing the ways for students to understand traditional and progressive English and grammar concepts (teaching about memes) and to explain them to others in creative and shareable ways (teaching memes). For example, I have found that while some students express their pride at knowing grammar and correcting others in a superiority-tinged way, an examination of

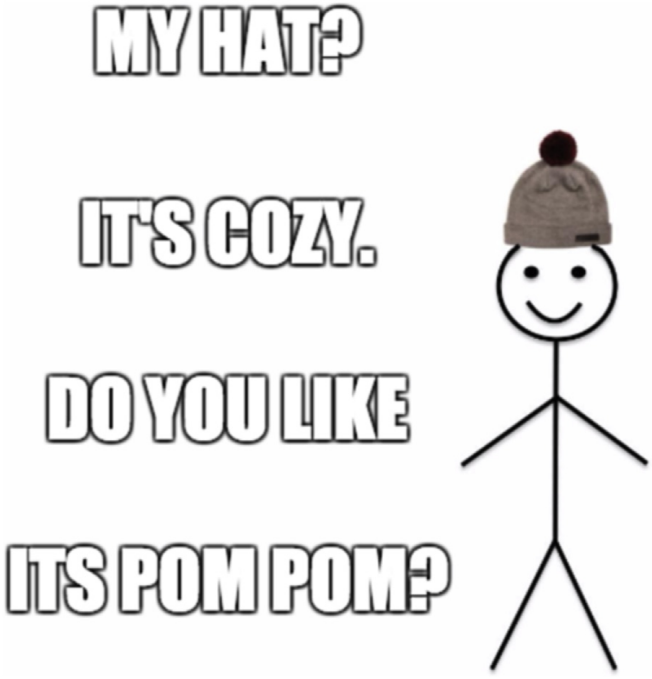

Fig. 4. Be like bill meme with narrative/instructional frame.

grammar memes can result in a new awareness of the politics of correction and the arguments and literacy traditions with which future teachers might or might not decide to align themselves. While such an examination can lead to more a progressive attitude about grammar like the one I espouse, it doesn't have to necessarily; but, it can at least offer students reasons for variations in English other than a person being wrong or deficient.

Finally, teaching grammar memes also expands the amount of useful grammatical information on the internet in the visually appealing and culturally approved frames of memes, a creative enterprise that just barely exists and is ripe for growth. And, in the area of contributing to the goal of inspiring rhetorically savvy and digitally-informed students, these efforts at expanding the representations and rhetorics of grammar memes on the internet offer hands-on lessons in enacting resistant participatory culture online and demonstrate the burgeoning rhetorical potential of grammar memes.

Methodological Implications

Throughout this project, I noticed a left-leaning bias in the selection of artifacts represented in studies of digital rhetorics. I found that the artifacts analyzed and shared in *Computers & Composition* and elsewhere are often of the progressive type I cite here, including "Keep Austin Weird" (Edbauer, 2005); "Yes We Can" (Kephart and Rafferty, 2009); Senator Stevens' "tubes" comment meme (Carter & Arroyo, 2011); Shepard Fairey's *Hope* image of President Obama (Gries, 2013); Pepper Spray Cop (Huntington, 2016); Occupy Wall Street (Huntington, 2016 and also Bratich, 2014); and the recent cooptation of #MyNYPD on Twitter (Hayes, 2017). This array of inspiring, resistant artifacts spurred in me a great disappointment that grammar memes do not resist oppressive forces or dominant culture. On the contrary, as I've noted, most grammar memes support a traditionalist point of view on grammar usage and too many use extreme, hate-based rhetoric.

This was an instructive instance of disappointment, however. For one, I was pushed to accept Jenkins et al's value of democracy and diversity in participatory culture even when some contributions do not make the world a better place. I considered, rather than ignored or disparaged, reasons why users might make traditionalist grammar memes. My disappointment also pushed me to ask why certain digital artifacts are chosen for rhetorical inquiry over others. My inquiry into traditionalist arguments about English language use riddled with nazi symbolism unfolded by happenstance. They would not have been my first choice in objects of study.

Additionally, studying texts and arguments that patently did not stick it to the man illuminated what seems to be an unexamined methodological assumption in the study of digital rhetorics: that digital artifacts from progressive political movements best exemplify and explain theories and practices of digital rhetoric. It may be true. Doug Eyman (2015)

listed among the pursuits of the study of digital rhetoric "the use of rhetorical methods for uncovering and interrogating ideologies and cultural formation" (p. 44). Yet, my perception of the literature suggests that this interrogation has perhaps been unconsciously focused on the use of digital practices to make mainly liberal arguments. I am not shaming or blaming scholars with these interests; these are also my interests.

That said, my accidental encounter with even a small slice of white supremacy via grammar memes has alerted me to the numerous, contemporary ideologies constructing and being constructed by digital practices that are highly relevant to our understanding of rhetoric and/on the internet today, including argument and identity-formation. I therefore close with suggestions for further interrogation in two areas of methodological concern: first, the questions of which users and digital artifacts are chosen for studies of writing and digital rhetorics and why; and, second, the merit of more purposefully studying arguments that occur outside of our internet bubbles and which resist our mainstreams.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2019.02.001.

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