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Facebook memes and the semiotics of typography: The case of *lemgthbook*

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Abstract: Since January 2017, an ever-growing agglomeration of Facebook groups has spawned (362 groups to date) whose defining characteristic was that all of their content was somehow thematically related to the concept of length. These groups, collectively titled *lemgthbook*, enforce a puzzling semiotic practice: the usage of the letter <n> is banned from their content and <n> is systematically replaced by <m>. This study adopts an ethnographic approach in order to provide a preliminary account for this practice through a qualitative analysis of *lemgthbook*-style user-generated content. The study's main goal is to investigate possible theoretical implications for the semiotics of typography within the framework of social semiotics. The content posted in *lemgthbook* groups, treated here as internet memes, is found to innovatively exploit the modal affordances of typography as a mode by creating meaningful typographic contrasts not on the level of typeface but through the substitution of alphabetic characters. This is found to be a result of the limitations imposed by the semiotic technology of Facebook, which does not readily allow for the inclusion of different-font text. It is also found that this peculiar semiotic practice has begun spreading outside *lemgthbook*. The findings further our understanding of the mode of typography expanding on its original conception by Van Leeuwen (2006). This is mainly achieved by considering the crucial role of social media technology in semiosis as recently brought to light by Poulsen & Kvåle (2018), whereby the availability (or lack thereof) of options for meaning-making on a social medium (e.g., can users produce text in different fonts?) results in different meaning-making patterns. Based on this semiotic analysis, the study also explores the humorous function of *lemgthbook* content. The discussion proposes a view of such content as a case of shitposting, a type of abstruse humour that proliferates on the internet.

Keywords: social semiotics; memes; internet linguistics; humour; online culture

1. Introduction

In January 2017, a Facebook group called *lemgthy earth: a lomg earth discussion group* was created. The group appeared to be aimed at parodying “flat Earth” conspiracy theory discourse and its defining characteristic was banning the use of the letter <n> from all its content. The letter <n>, never explicitly mentioned but only described as “half-m, before o” in the group’s description,¹ was thereby systematically replaced by the letter <m>. Since then, 362 Facebook groups have spawned enforcing the same puzzling practice. The groups were originally thematically linked due to their reference to the concept of length although more recently created groups have seen a thematic expansion by focusing on different themes while retaining the key semiotic practice of “<m> replaces <n>” (e.g., *hecking amgrybois amd*

¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/lemgth/about> or/and the Appendix for a screenshot of the group’s description.

where to find them focuses on entities that have an angry appearance). Together they constitute a collection of Facebook groups dubbed *lemgthbook*, all listed in a purposely made website of the same name (“lemgthbook,” n.d.). The goal of this paper is to provide a semiotic account for the practice of replacing <n> with <m> in the internet meme-type content posted primarily in *lemgthbook* groups, but also elsewhere. The investigation of such a creative digital text phenomenon provides the opportunity to explore possible theoretical implications for the semiotics of typography in new media.

Despite a growing interest in the study of internet memes and social media witnessed in recent years (e.g., Lou, 2017; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015; Varis & Blommaert, 2015), there has been little concern with investigating the theoretical implications of novel multimodal text phenomena created across platforms. Additionally, the study of multimodal meaning-making practices on the web has not yet attracted much attention from the theoretical perspective of social semiotics, a distinctive approach to the study of meaning-making based on systemic functional linguistics (cf. Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). Therefore, this paper attempts to employ a social semiotics approach for analysing the *lemgthbook* phenomenon in relation to the study of typography as a mode (i.e., a resource for meaning-making) as introduced by Van Leeuwen (2005b; 2006).

The paper seeks to answer the following questions. Can the replacement of <n> with <m> in *lemgthbook* (and beyond) serve to further our understanding of the meaning-making potential of typography as a mode in a social semiotics approach? How does the creation of *lemgthbook* memes relate to the modal affordances of typography on Facebook? In what terms can these memes be understood as humorous online culture artefacts based on their semiotic analysis?

An inductive qualitative analysis of *lemgthbook* memes through ethnographic immersion in the groups reveals that in their creation the semiotic potential of typography is exploited in a way that it is both contingent upon the options for meaning-making provided by the Facebook interface and novel. These memes can be viewed as abstruse humorous creations characterisable as shitposting (i.e., purposely irrelevant/bad-quality content) (Holm, 2017).

In the following sections, after a brief literature review that outlines the theoretical framework of the study (Section 2), I introduce the method adopted (Section 3) before providing an analysis of two representative examples of such memes (Section 4). In section 5, the findings of the analysis are summarised, and the humorous function of *lemgthbook*-type memes is discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social semiotics constitutes a distinctive approach to the study of meaning-making based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Van Leeuwen, 2005a). In it, meaning-making is viewed as an inherently multimodal enterprise; that is, meaning-making occurs along different *modes*. Within the framework of social semiotics, modes are understood as “socially shaped and culturally given resource[s] for making meaning” (Kress, 2009, p. 54). For example, written/spoken language, images, layout, and music are all understood in social semiotic terms as different modes through which meaning can be generated in different ways according to the modes’ affordances (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

After his seminal work with Kress on visual meaning, *Reading images* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), Van Leeuwen (2005b; 2006) went on to argue that typography should also be treated as a mode in this analytical framework. Demonstrating that typography can be analysed as displaying the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions² established in SFL, he proposed developing a detailed grammar of typography as a mode (Van Leeuwen, 2006). This paper works toward that goal by examining typographic meaning in social media memes. In this endeavour, Van Leeuwen's (2005b, p. 138) view of typography as a mode in which "visual communication and writing form an inseparable unit" is of crucial importance.

A key notion relevant to this idea of reconciling the visual and the verbal is that of *intersemiotic complementarity*, as introduced by Royce (1998) for page-based multimodal texts. Intersemiotic complementarity is defined as a relationship between modes, whereby they "semantically complement each other to produce a single textual phenomenon," the semiotic output of which is "greater than the sum of the individual [...] contributions" of each mode (Royce, 1998, pp. 26-27). This phenomenon occurs along (at least one of) the three levels of meaning-making labelled metafunctions (Royce, 1998). Despite it being introduced as an analytical tool for page-based text, the concept of intersemiotic complementarity can prove useful for the analysing digital texts within the framework of social semiotics. However, this presupposes an adaptation of the concept that will consider the factor of social media technology.

Following recent trends toward the study of software and technology in relation to semiosis (see Geenen, Norris, & Makboon, 2015 for a brief overview), social semioticians have taken an interest in social media as "semiotic technology" (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). Because social media technology provides a "semiotic surface" that shapes the potential for meaning-making afforded to multimodal texts created on it, it is necessary to consider this technology's features in relation to how they influence digitally mediated meaning-making on these platforms (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). Given these considerations, this paper approaches (digital) typography as employed in the *lengthbook* memes in relation to how Facebook's software shapes its semiotic potential by allowing for certain meaning-making choices and at the same time restricting the availability of other options (e.g., including different-font text in posts).

Finally, it is necessary to address what is meant by "internet memes." Lou (2017, p. 107) insightfully describes internet memes as user-generated "digital art[e]facts" created, altered, and shared online, which typically come in a "template-like" format despite the fact that their form varies vastly, from "hashtags" to video challenges. Varis and Blommaert (2015, p. 31) define memes rather laconically as "signs that have gone viral on the Internet"—a definition justified by their focus on virality. In a different study, focused on internet humour, memes are simply seen as a "medium that is often used to channel humour on the Internet" (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). While these definitions constitute valid approaches to memes from different perspectives, in this study memes are defined in social semiotic terms as a *genre*; i.e., a text structure that displays recognisable patterns

² In SFL, the term metafunctions refers to the three dimensions of meaning-making exhibited by a sign system: representing something occurring in the world (ideational metafunction); referring to the relations between participants in the interaction (interpersonal metafunction); constituting an internally coherent unit (text) that interacts with its context (textual metafunction) (Van Leeuwen, 2005a).

of form and content as well as common functions (Van Leeuwen, 2005a). Memes constitute multimodal texts that exhibit a “template-like” form, as noted by Lou (2017), and whose content varies vastly given that their content dimension is overshadowed by their function as “forms of conviviality” (Varis & Blommaert, 2015), which renders them cases of “communication without content” akin to small talk (Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

3. Methodology

The present study comprises an inductive qualitative approach to empirical data collected via ethnographic immersion in the groups where they were created. Two Facebook posts are analysed due to space limitations. This analysis gives rise to theoretical considerations that aim to contribute to the analytical framework of social semiotics and to our understanding of *lemgthbook*-inspired online humour.

3.1 Data Collection

An ethnographic approach was adopted for data collection. The data were collected from Facebook groups (sometimes “closed” groups) of which the researcher was an active member. Group administrators granted their permission for the data collection and the posts were anonymised.

The choice of an ethnographic approach was necessitated given the nature of *lemgthbook* content. *Lemgthbook* comprises a collection of mainly closed Facebook groups, therefore data collection would not have been possible if the researcher was not a member. Further ethnographic immersion in the groups was also required to gain insight into the nature of *lemgthbook* posts since *lemgthbook* members constitute an in-group that shares a common understanding of the context-bound value of the semiotic practices they enforce. Familiarisation with the type of humour generated therein was also required, so that user-level understanding of it could inform the analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analysed drawing from the framework of social semiotics. This analytical decision was contingent upon the theoretical underpinnings of this study for the production of valid results. This framework was also favoured due to its wide applicability (Van Leeuwen, 2005a), which in turn necessitates gaining a deeper understanding of the object of enquiry besides relevant theoretical concepts. The ethnographic approach adopted also aimed at meeting this necessity.

As for the analytical procedure followed, an inductive approach was adopted. First, the instantiation of “<m> replaces <n>” was traced in the posts analysed. This was followed by ever-expanding considerations of how the practice functioned along different levels of meaning-making, how it related to other modal elements in the post (pictures, verbal text), and how this amounted to the post’s final semiotic output. This led from an illustration of how the phenomenon occurs individually to more general observations on how it functions.

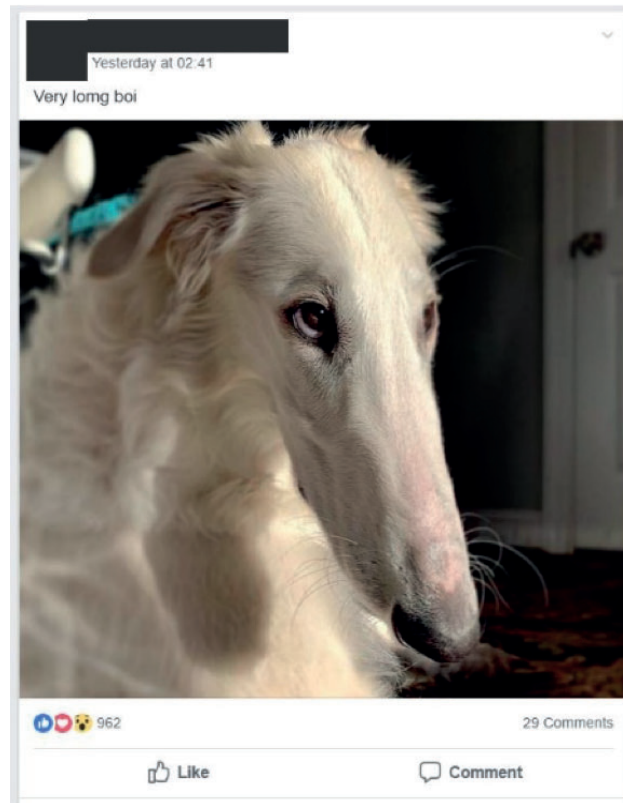


Figure 1. *Very lomg boi*. (Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/lomgbois/permalink/1209284405901498/>.)

4. Analysis

In this section, two Facebook posts enforcing the “<m> replaces <n>” practice are analysed. One post comes from a closed *lemgthbook* group, while the other is found in a group outside *lemgthbook*, thereby illustrating the spread of this semiotic practice beyond its original space, which also warrants its approach as meme-like content. The analysis is necessarily contained to the semiotic aspects of these memes that are relevant to the paper’s goal only.

Figure 1 shows a post from the *lemgthbook* group *Famtastic Lomgbois amd Where to Fimd Them*. The post consists of a naturalistic pictorial representation of a dog with a very long muzzle, “the visual” in Royce’s terms (1998), accompanied by a three-word English language text, “the verbal.” Typography could be analysed here as a third pole in the multimodal structuring of the post, viewed as a mode that encompasses both the verbal (i.e., written language) and the visual (Van Leeuwen, 2005b). While this view is certainly valid and despite Royce’s (1998, p. 41) treatment of typographic features as mere verbal meaning (i.e., written language) conventions, for the purposes of this analysis I propose viewing the mode of typography as part of the visual given that (a) the case of “<m> replaces <n>” disrupts the grammar of the verbal (i.e., English orthography) thereby also disrupting its linearity and rendering it a non-linear composition which is a testament of its pronounced multimodal nature (see Royce, 1998); (b) the use of <m> functions iconically (rather than symbolically) for the representation of the concept of length pointing to the construction of visual meaning. Van Leeuwen himself (2005b; 2006) frames the study of the mode of typography as an exploration of visual meaning-making.

The replacement of <n> with <m> constitutes a novel meaning-making

choice within the affordances of the mode of typography. Examples cited by Van Leeuwen (2006) showcase the semiotic resources of typography focusing on typeface (see pp. 147-150). In this case, the replacement of <n> with <m> is a case of expansion from “condensed” to “wide” (see Table 1 in Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 151). However, this meaningful contrast is not articulated on the level of typeface but through two different alphabetic letter characters of same size, font, and overall style. The particular nature of this practice is owed to the semiotic potential provided here by the social medium of Facebook. Facebook’s technology does not allow for the easy inclusion of different fonts and font sizes in posts but only allows one-font text and emojis in the verbal text region of posts. While there are ways to incorporate different typefaces in a Facebook post (e.g., through alt-codes), these options are not readily provided by the Facebook interface in a user-friendly fashion but are up to users of more advanced digital skills to implement through their own initiative. Facebook software does not afford users the potential to use a lengthier version of any letter—which would have been possible in, say, Microsoft Word or in handwriting—and this is why the meaning potential of the condensed/wide contrast between the available letters <n> and <m> is tapped into. What this illustrates is that the semiotic technology of the social medium is of major relevance for the analysis of multimodal texts created on it, as Poulsen and Kvåle (2018) argue.

Despite the fact that typeface contrasts are not employed, the case of typographic meaning-making under discussion still exhibits the three SFL metafunctions, which allows us to formally define typography as a mode (Kress, 2009). The extension of <n> (“half-m”, according to the original *length-book* group’s description) to <m> signifies the ideational meaning of increased length. On an interpersonal level, this use of the letter <m> draws upon the readers’ cultural knowledge of both <m> and <n>’s forms as letter symbols of the English alphabet along with these forms’ relative relations (the former is longer than the latter). In terms of textual meaning, this <m> figures with increased salience; however, this is not owed to the exploitation of visual meaning-making modes (e.g., layout) as one would expect (Van Leeuwen, 2006). Instead, the increased salience of <m> is a result of its violation of the grammar of written English, from which this case of alphabetic character substitution cannot be separated. The unexpected presence of <m> in a place where <n> is expected by an English-literate reader for the production of the canonical spelling of an English word (<long>) grants this instance of <m> a textual status due to its glaring incongruity. The unfitness of <m> in this position is markedly accentuated because official English spelling constitutes a heavily institutionally defined mode that allows minimal flexibility, especially since non-compliance with its regularities generates heavy indexical meanings given the prevalence of prescriptivist metalinguistic discourse in society.

Finally, notable ideational intersemiotic complementarity relations can be observed in the post, as both the verbal and the visual accentuate the attributes of the main participant (dog, “boi”); namely, the participant’s length. In the verbal part, this is accomplished through a declarative statement containing an adjective with an intensifier (“Very lo[n]g”). In the visual, this occurs through a *symbolic suggestive* process whereby the participant, the dog, simply “poses” as the *carrier* of the attribute of length, which is accentuated as a “mood” within the visual representation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, pp.



Figure 2. *So lomg*. (Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/451689008565313>.)

105-106). The <m> sign contributes to shaping this general “mood” centered around length by calling attention to its own long form through its incongruent usage in writing (see above), thereby “blurring” background details of the picture leading to the foregrounding of the attribute of length (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 106). The intersemiotic complementarity relation thus established is one of *repetition* (Royce, 1998). As will be discussed in Section 5, this relation might be seen as being linked to the humorous effect of the meme.

Figure 2 displays an instance of replacement of <n> with <m> in a post made outside *lengthbook*, in the *Animals in Predicaments Posting* group. The post also contains a watermark that reads “@dogecore” suggesting that it might have originated in a group/account of that name—which, again, is not part of *lengthbook*. This post contains verbal text overlaid on a picture with four frames in the style of a comic, as well as additional verbal text (“Transcendent”) in the verbal part of the post. Due to space limitations and given this paper’s goal, I will only address the former verbal text.

Apart from illustrating the viral spread of the *length* meme’s key semiotic practice outside of *lengthbook*, the analytical importance of the *so lomg* post lies in the fact that the function of <m> here does not result directly in the multimodal production of the literal meaning of length but bears this meaning at its core and elaborates it on different levels. The form <m>, through its “distinctive feature” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 140) of increased length in contrast with <n>, as discussed, suggests the meaning of *long*. In the visual part of the post, this feature of <m> is metaphorically related to the depiction of increasing distance suggested across the four frames as the dog gradually disappears into the sky. Additionally, through ideational intersemiotic complementarity with the verbal mode that contains the word *long*, the potential of <m>

becomes involved in an intersemiotic complementarity relation of *synonymy*.

In the end, given that the word *long* here does not function literally in the idiom *so long*, it becomes evident that the iconic form of <m> has served as a source harvested from the *lemgthbook* meme format (use of <m>; theme: length; function: humour, conviviality) from which different levels of meaning were structured. Consequently, meaning-making based on the “<m> replaces <n>” form is seen here gradually stirring away from the literal meaning of length.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The examples discussed in Section 4 suggest that replacing <n> with <m> constitutes a semiotic practice innovatively based on the affordances of typography as a mode used within the technologically-imposed limitations of Facebook as a social medium. This practice, although originating in *lemgthbook*, has spread outside the niche groups that fathered it, thereby promoting more broadly a novel case of typographic meaning-making in internet memes. In some cases, “<m> replaces <n>” can also be found generating more than the literal meaning of length as a result of its use in the context of posts that are not explicitly concerned with length.

The findings answer the analytical questions posed suggesting that: (a) “<m> replaces <n>” is an artefact of the technological limitations of Facebook’s semiotic technology; (b) this practice represents a novel way to produce typographic meaning through alphabetic character substitution instead of on the level of typeface.

As regards humorous function, the practice of “<m> replaces <n>” originated in a group whose description (see Appendix) largely relied on a kind of humour dubbed *deadpan* (Holm, 2017). Holm (2017, p. 4) defines deadpan as a form of “abstruse” humour which “refuses to confirm its comic nature by providing its audience with a lower level of information than is usually required for the straightforward confirmation of interpretation.” Indeed, in the case of *lemgthy earth* the burden is upon the audience to decide whether the content presented to them in the description is comic or not (Holm, 2017). The systematic replacement of <n> with <m> enforced and actively commented upon only serves to amplify the absurdity of the text while providing no reassurance that this is in fact a joke.

Holm (2017) finds that deadpan thrives on the internet due to the vast potential to share content outside its original context which might have provided contextual cues for the confirmation of the content’s comic nature. Evidently, when *lemgthbook* memes are encountered within *lemgthbook*, the very groups in which they are found function as a cue for the memes’ comic reading. However, when these memes’ key semiotic practice spreads outside of this space (Figure 2), they “revel in the comic potential of blank absurdity” in a way that resembles memes like “Doge”—which renders them forms of online deadpan (Holm, 2017, p. 7).

If *lemgthbook*-type memes cannot be characterised as deadpan when posted within *lemgthbook* groups, how are they to be categorised? Following the categorisation adopted by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) for the classification of internet humour into distinct *styles* and *types*, *lemgthbook* posts could reasonably be labelled *exaggeration-based* (in terms of humour

type) *affiliative* (in terms of humour style) jokes, which aligns with our semiotic analysis. In terms of humour type, a dimension which considers primarily the content and form of the meme, the intersemiotic complementarity relation of repetition (Figure 1) indeed results in an effect of exaggeration. As for humour style, which pertains to the interpersonal function and content of a joke, *lemgthbook* content fits the description of affiliative humour; i.e., jokes made to “amuse others and facilitate relationships” by referring to “the situation of someone else in a positive way” (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 294). This also aligns with our understanding of *lemgthbook* posts as memes and of memes as forms of conviviality following Varis and Blommaert (2015). The creation and sharing of these memes enhances the cohesion of *lemgthbook* members as a group of social actors by calling their focus to a specific kind of artefact with specific characteristics (Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

The above classification, albeit justifiable, might be seen as not doing justice to the peculiar nature of the semiotic practice enforced as a key characteristic of these groups. While the validity of describing such jokes as exaggeration-focused is undeniable, describing them as affiliative jokes is a characterisation that might be considered not fine-grained enough. For one, the affiliative function of *lemgthbook* posts is presupposed when one approaches them as memes (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Further, despite it being technically true that *lemgthbook* posts refer to “the situation of someone else in a positive way” (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 294), it is doubtful whether this is their main focus since, unlike canonical memes, they do not present a relatable situation, especially since the “someone else” element could be anything, from a tall human being, to a dog with a long muzzle (Figure 1), to an inanimate object of outstanding length. What calls most attention in a *lemgthbook* post is adherence to the “no <n>’s allowed” rule and thereby the semiotic practice under discussion. This is also illustrated in the creation of groups (humourously) devoted to “policing” the usage of <n> such as *beep beep forbiddem glyph restorative justice team* and *BEEP BEEP GLYPH POLICE PUT YOUR HAMDS UP*.³

Following these considerations, the group-oriented functioning of *lemgthbook* memes, their irrelevance to the specific characteristics⁴ of the situation they are presenting, and—perhaps most importantly—their strong adherence to a peculiar semiotic practice makes *lemgthbook* memes approximate deadpan. More specifically, this type of humour fits into the genre of shitposting, which is defined as the posting of “intentionally poor quality or irrelevant content” (Holm, 2017, p. 9). While “poor quality” is an inherently vague observation in the absence of further specification, the intentional misspelling of English words by substituting <n> with <m> could be an indicator of low quality by virtue of illustrating a lack of adherence to heavily institutionalised norms.

Ultimately, *lemgthbook* memes with their novel semiotic practices present a challenge for the analyst that seeks to categorise them and an exciting opportunity for further research. From this preliminary effort to examine their main semiotic practice, it could be argued that they constitute

³ 15 such “policing” groups exist at the moment and another 8 specifically call attention to the use of the “forbiddem glyph” (“lemgthbook,” n.d.).

⁴ The characteristic of length itself appears to be taken on a secondary role with the more recent emergence of groups irrelevant to length and the use of “<m> replaces <n>” outside *lemgthbook* with a non-literal focus.

cases of conventionalised shitposting, whose comic nature is often revealed by the context of *lemgthbook*. It is hoped that future large-scale analytical efforts might expand on this preliminary analysis by also providing quantitative insight, which might substantiate the generalisations made here.

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Appendix

Figure 1 presents a screenshot of the description of lengthy earth: a long earth discussion group on its Facebook page.



Figure I. *lengthy earth: a long earth discussion group* Facebook group description. (Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/length/about/>.)

Context of research

MA course, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*