



Memes and social criticism: A semantic analysis of irony in political humor on Instagram @memecomic.id

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Abstract

This study aims to identify and analyze the types of irony found in political memes on the Instagram account @memecomic.id using semantic and pragmatic approaches. Memes were selected as the object of study due to their role as a popular medium for expressing social criticism in the digital era. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis techniques. The data consisted of thirty political-themed memes analyzed based on Perrine's (1966) classification of irony: verbal, situational, and dramatic. The results indicate that situational irony is the most dominant type, appearing in sixteen memes, followed by eleven instances of verbal irony and three of dramatic irony. These findings suggest that the mismatch between expectation and reality is the most commonly used strategy to convey socio-political critique through memes. The study demonstrates that irony in memes is not merely a form of entertainment, but also a pragmatic mode of communication that reflects social tension and public dissatisfaction with political conditions in Indonesia.

Keywords

irony, semantics, pragmatics, political memes, social media

Introduction

The development of information technology has brought significant impacts on human life. These advancements have made it easier for society to search for and obtain information through various devices, such as computers and mobile phones. This convenience is closely linked to the role of the internet, which functions as a primary support in the digital era. According to internet expert Onno W. Purbo (Prihatna, 2005), the internet and its various applications such as the Web, VoIP, and E-mail essentially serve as media to streamline communication processes. As internet usage increases, the use of social media has also expanded. Various data sources show that Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest levels of social media use. The number of users continues to grow annually in line with the popularity of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Path, Instagram, and other social media networks. A survey conducted by APJII in collaboration with PusaKaKom at the University of Indonesia, involving 7,000 internet users from various provinces, revealed that 87.4% of respondents actively access social media (Prihadi, 2015). Alongside the rising use of the internet and social media in Indonesia, a new phenomenon has emerged among users: the creative production of memes, which spread rapidly and receive a wide range of responses online. Their growing popularity has turned memes into a widespread digital cultural phenomenon (Luthfi, 2015).

The term meme, as commonly understood today, refers to a collection of images or videos that have been modified—either by adding text or combining them with other elements—to create new content with a different narrative. To date, there is no specific literature or theory that discusses memes in depth, nor is there an official equivalent for the word meme in the Indonesian language. Nevertheless, Indonesians generally pronounce it as “meme” (Amretasari, 2015). Memes have become one of the most popular forms of communication in the digital age, especially for expressing social and political criticism. This has sparked the researcher's interest in exploring the phenomenon through the lens of linguistics. Shifman (2014) states that internet memes function as a form of participatory cultural practice, in which humor is used to collectively respond to and comment on political issues. In the field of linguistics, semantics introduces the study of meaning. This aligns with (Chaer, 2013) view that semantics is a branch of language study concerned with understanding meaning. Within the context of linguistics, memes often employ irony as a rhetorical device to convey implicit meanings.

Previous studies that support this research include Hasibuan and (Hasibuan & Mulyadi, 2023), which focused on examining irony in the Arabic version of the song “A’touna Et-Tufoole.” The objective of this study was to explore the meaning of irony in the lyrics and analyze how irony is utilized within the song’s context. The researchers applied semantic theory—specifically cognitive semantics—to describe the semantic function of linguistic meaning. The method used was descriptive qualitative with content analysis, in which the data was collected through reading and documenting the lyrics. One limitation of this study was the lack of empirical data to support the presented analysis. The research relied heavily on theoretical approaches without including statistical data or concrete case studies to reinforce its findings. For future studies, it is recommended to conduct

interviews or surveys with listeners from various cultural backgrounds to understand how they interpret the irony in "A'touna Et-Tufoole." This would provide additional insights into the role of cultural context in comprehending irony in Arabic song lyrics.

Another relevant study by (Kaur & Subet, 2019) investigated the use of animal elements in figurative language among the Sikh community in Malaysia. The aim of the study was to identify and analyze the ironic meanings embedded in five figurative expressions involving animals, using the inquisitive semantic approach developed by Nor Hashimah Jalaludin in 2014. Through a qualitative method and interviews, the study found that the expressions not only conveyed literal meanings but also carried layered meanings reflecting the philosophy and wisdom of the Punjabi people. The inquisitive semantic approach enabled deeper interpretation by linking surface meanings with cultural context and local thought patterns, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how figurative language reflects their norms and values.

The novelty of this present study lies in its semantic analysis of irony in memes on the Instagram account @memecomic.id, which has not been specifically studied before. Therefore, this research aims to identify the types of irony in memes and to describe the meaning of irony as used in political memes on the @memecomic.id Instagram account. The methodology employed follows the descriptive method (Creswell, 2008), the theory of irony types (Perrine, 1966), and the theory of meaning (Leech, 1997).

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with semantic analysis methods. According to Bogdan and Taylor (Moleong, 2012), qualitative research is a method that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the objective of the study, which is to understand the hidden meanings behind the use of irony in political memes on social media. The study does not aim to quantify the frequency of irony but rather to interpret how irony operates within the social and political context of Indonesia.

The primary data in this study consist of thirty political memes taken from the Instagram account @memecomic.id. This account was selected because it is known for actively producing and sharing humorous content that is political and satirical in nature, with a substantial following among Indonesian social media users. The analyzed memes were posted between March and early May. The data were selected purposively, filtering for content that met specific criteria: containing both text and visuals referencing political or social issues, and demonstrating the potential use of irony.

The main data comprise the textual content in the meme images and political captions posted by @memecomic.id that contain elements of irony. The subject of this research is the political memes published by the Instagram account @memecomic.id. This subject was chosen because the memes frequently contain social and political criticism conveyed through irony, making them highly relevant for semantic analysis. The data collection technique employed is documentation. According to (Hikmat, 2011, p. 86),

documentation is the process of tracing and obtaining necessary data from existing sources. In this study, data were collected and analyzed from political memes containing irony published by the Instagram account @memecomic.id. The process involved selecting memes relevant to the research focus—political memes with ironic elements—then downloading or screenshotting the selected memes, recording the upload dates, and identifying the political context at the time of posting.

Furthermore, the collected data were categorized based on the types of irony used. The analysis also examined the relationship between the text and image in each meme to understand semantic contradictions in meaning (Sugiyono, 2010). After data collection, the analysis stage was conducted using theories of semantic irony to interpret how meanings in memes contradict their literal expressions, and how these meanings relate to the ongoing social and political context through semantic meaning analysis.

The analysis followed several systematic steps. First, the type of irony was identified based on Perrine's (1966) classification, which divides irony into three types: verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony. Each meme was analyzed to determine the type of irony used by examining the relationship between the text, imagery, and social context. Second, semantic analysis was conducted to explore both literal and implicit meanings in the memes. Leech's (1981) theory of meaning was applied to understand how word choice, phrases, and sentence structures contribute to the delivery of irony. Third, a pragmatic analysis was carried out to examine how irony functions as satire, social criticism, or expressions of public dissatisfaction.

In analyzing the relationship between visual elements and text, this study also considers aspects of multimodality—namely, the interaction between language and imagery in meaning-making. This means that memes are not analyzed solely for their written text, but also for visual expressions, character design, colors, and background settings that build a particular narrative. Additionally, the use of content analysis is highly relevant for understanding how social narratives are constructed within digital space (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). To enhance the validity of the findings, repeated data reading and discussions with the research advisor were conducted to ensure that interpretations were not subjective. Moreover, the researcher compared the results with previous studies that discuss irony in popular media. With this methodology, the study aims to uncover the hidden meanings behind the use of irony in political memes and explain how irony functions as an effective communication strategy in the social media era.

Results

This study aims to identify and classify the types of irony in 30 political memes from the Instagram account @memecomic.id. The analysis reveals that all three types of irony according to Perrine (1966)—verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony—are present in the data. Each meme was analyzed based on the alignment between its text, imagery, and socio-political context. The results show that situational irony is the most dominant, appearing in 16 memes, followed by verbal irony in 11 memes, and dramatic

irony in 3 memes. Thus, the majority of the memes contain situational irony. The complete classification is presented below:

Table 1. Distribution of Irony Types Identified in the Data

No	Type of Irony	Codes
1	Verbal Irony	M2, M3, M7, M11, M13, M17, M20, M21, M23, M27, M28.
2	Situasional Irony	M1, M4, M5, M6, M8, M10, M12, M14, M16. M18, M19, M22, M24, M25, M26, M29
3	Dramatic Irony	M9, M15, M30
Total		30

This classification is based on the indicators previously established to distinguish between the three types of irony. For instance, verbal irony is identified through statements that are literally positive but contextually contain sarcasm or ridicule. Situational irony is marked by a discrepancy between expectations and reality as presented in the meme. Meanwhile, dramatic irony is characterized by a gap in understanding between the character(s) depicted in the meme and the audience. The following is a description of the findings based on each type of irony:

Verbal Irony

Memes categorized under verbal irony exhibit the use of language that contrasts with the intended meaning. The irony arises from the discrepancy between the literal meaning of the text and the accompanying visual or social context. The following are several examples identified in the data:

Case: False Enthusiasm Toward Political Situations



Figure 1. Meme 7

Meme (M7) features the text “BESOK BAKAL ADA KEJUTAN APA LAGI YA DARI NEGERI INI,” which, when read literally, expresses anticipation and curiosity. However, irony emerges as the visual expression of the character in the meme displays signs of exhaustion and anxiety. The socio-political context of Indonesia—marked by frequent instability and unexpected developments—serves to reinforce the implicit meaning of the statement. Rather than conveying optimism, the phrase subtly expresses disillusionment with the country’s unpredictable situation. This stark contrast between the literal and intended meanings reflects a form of verbal irony, where the language used does not represent the speaker’s true intent but instead functions as a vehicle for social and political critique.

Case: Symbolic Rejection of Moral Values

In meme (M27), a Google search is shown about the meaning of the color blue on the Dutch flag, which represents honesty and justice. However, the lower part of the image depicts a scene from the movie *Toy Story*, where the character representing “Indonesia” rejects these values while saying, “I don’t want to play with you anymore.” The irony lies in the contradiction between these noble values and the dismissive action, reflecting a critique of the country’s failure to uphold moral principles. Another example can be seen in meme (M3), which contains the text “APRIL MOP? INI INDONESIA BUNG! KITA DIKERJAIN SETIAP HARI,” emphasizing that the disregard for honesty and justice has become a normal condition rather than a sudden surprise.



Figure 2. Meme 27



Figure 3. Meme 3

Case: Rhetorical Neglect of Promises of Efficiency

Meme (M20) depicts the character SpongeBob holding a document labeled “EFISIENSI,” then burning it while smiling. At the end of the panel, the phrase “DIEM-DIEM RAPAT DI HOTEL BINTANG LIMA” appears, with the word “HILIH” reinforcing the sarcastic tone. The irony arises from the contrast between the claim of efficiency and the secretive wasteful behavior. This meme satirizes officials or institutions that rhetorically uphold efficiency but in practice act otherwise.



Figure 4. Meme 20

Situational Irony

Situational irony arises when the reality depicted in the meme contradicts societal expectations, common logic, or upheld social values. This type of irony is the most dominant in the data because it effectively reveals social and political absurdities in Indonesia. Below are three main cases:

Case: Systemic Inequality and Double Standards

Several memes depict injustices within the social and legal systems. Meme (M24) shows two teachers being treated differently: one remains employed despite being involved in a scandal, while the other is dismissed for singing a satirical song—illustrating double standards. Meme (M11) exposes legal inequality, where ordinary people receive harsh punishments while corrupt elites often escape. Meme (M18) portrays public apathy toward news of corruption due to the rare severe punishment of offenders. These three memes illustrate the irony between the expectation of justice and the reality of inequality and indifference caused by a broken system.



Figure 5. Meme 24



Figure 6. Meme 11



Figure 7. Meme 18

Case: Denial of Reality and Resistance to Criticism

Meme (M14) depicts a relaxed character in a burning room saying, “Indonesia baik-baik saja,” satirizing the government’s trivialization of the crisis. Meme (M8) shows the “rompi anti kritik,” symbolizing the elite’s rejection of criticism, despite criticism being essential in a democracy. Meme (M16) features a person proud to maintain sanity amid social-political absurdity, highlighting how difficult it is. These three memes illustrate how those in power often deny reality and suppress public voices, creating irony between the expectation of openness and the repressive reality.



Figure 8. Meme 14



Figure 9. Meme 8



Figure 10. Meme 16

Dramatic Irony

This irony occurs when the audience is aware of something that the character in the meme does not realize, creating a tension between appearance and the true meaning. Although less frequent, dramatic irony delivers a strong critique, especially regarding the disparity between image and reality.



Figure 11. Meme 9

Case: Issue Diversion Amid Public Unawareness

Meme (M9) depicts the silent approval of a bill while the public is busy with other viral issues. The public in the meme is unaware of the elites' manipulation in passing controversial policies. The audience understands this issue diversion, creating sharp satire towards manipulative political practices.

Case: Contrast between Religious Symbols and Corruption

Meme (M30) features a hadith quote emphasizing the importance of honesty and moral responsibility, visually paired with images of smiling corrupt officials in various poses. Dramatic irony arises here because the characters in the meme—the corrupt officials—appear calm and dignified, while their actions directly contradict the values they publicly display. Audiences familiar with both references (religious teachings and corruption reality) recognize the sharp contrast. This meme not only mocks corrupt behavior but also highlights hypocrisy and moral manipulation in the political arena.



Figure 12. Meme 10

Case: The Protector Who Becomes a Threat

Meme (M15) features the character Homelander and delivers sharp criticism toward authorities who are supposed to protect but instead participate in extortion. The term "Isilop," used as a satirical nickname for the police, adds a layer of satire and public disappointment toward a corrupt law enforcement institution allied with thuggery.

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that irony in political memes produced by the Instagram account @memecomic.id shows a varied distribution but tends to be dominated by situational irony. This reflects the meme creators' skill in exploiting the tension between expectations and reality as an effective communication strategy to

convey socio-political criticism. Meanwhile, verbal irony is more frequently used to deliver direct sarcasm through wordplay, while dramatic irony, although the least frequent, still carries significant message power due to the imbalance of knowledge between the characters and the audience. These three types of irony demonstrate that memes, as a contemporary medium, can serve as a complex and meaningful form of expression, especially in responding to social and political dynamics in Indonesia.



Figure 13. Meme 15

Discussion

The use of irony in the political memes analyzed in this study demonstrates that memes as a form of digital communication not only convey explicit messages but also contain rich implicit meanings. Irony, as a rhetorical strategy, serves to critique socio-political conditions in a subtle, humorous, yet pointed manner. From a linguistic perspective, irony is closely related to semantics and pragmatics because it involves the relationship between the literal meaning and the intended meaning of an utterance. Irony in memes is not merely a source of humor but a serious form of communication that packages complex messages in an easily digestible format. As noted by (Milner, 2018), political memes function as a form of public discourse that voices political opinions through symbols and popular cultural narratives. Similarly, (Attardo, 1994) suggests that irony can serve as a tool to criticize authority, create collective identity, and build solidarity within society. Therefore, this discussion will elaborate on how irony operates within each type of meme based on the research findings, linking it to relevant theories and the social context underpinning it.

Verbal Irony: Criticism Through Direct Sarcasm

Verbal irony arises when what is said contradicts what is actually meant. In political memes, this type of irony is often used to express dissatisfaction with government

policies or certain social situations through statements that literally sound neutral or positive, but whose true meaning is quite the opposite. For example, in a meme containing the text “What surprise will this country have tomorrow?”, the phrase grammatically sounds neutral, even enthusiastic. However, in the visual and social context, the sentence conveys frustration and distrust towards the state of the country, which often surprises the public with irrational decisions or events.

Furthermore, Grice argues that expressing a derogatory attitude is an essential aspect for someone who uses irony (Popa-Wyatt, 2017). According to (Grice, 1975), verbal irony involves violating the cooperative principle, particularly the maxim of quality. The speaker says something literally untrue with the intention that the listener understands the opposite meaning. In memes, verbal irony is reinforced by visual context such as character expressions, color schemes, or other symbols that guide the reader to grasp the hidden meaning behind the text. Thus, semantic and pragmatic functions work together to effectively convey ironic messages.

From a semantic perspective, the use of verbal irony also relates to connotative meaning (Leech, 1981), which arises from emotional or social associations attached to certain words or phrases. The phrase “we are fooled every day” not only conveys the meaning that the people feel deceived but also builds a negative image toward the party considered responsible, namely the government. This shows that verbal irony in memes serves as a compact form of social criticism, despite being delivered in a brief and humorous manner.

Situational Irony: The Tension Between Expectation and Reality

Situational irony is identified as the most dominant type of irony in this study. This irony occurs when the outcome of an event or action drastically differs from what is expected. In political memes, this is often manifested through the juxtaposition of two contrasting elements, such as news about two figures being treated differently by institutions despite similar cases, or statements claiming that “everything is fine” when, in reality, a crisis is ongoing. The use of situational irony reflects social tensions within society. The public expects state institutions to act fairly, transparently, and consistently in their policies. However, the reality reveals double standards, injustice, and absurdities in decision-making processes. A meme depicting two teachers (M4) with contrasting fates exemplifies situational irony that exposes systemic inequalities in education and bureaucracy.

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Wilson & Sperber, 2007), situational irony exploits the discrepancy between audience expectations and the presented reality. When the audience recognizes this disparity, the ironic message becomes more potent, triggering cognitive and emotional responses. As explained by (Dyner, 2014), irony is not merely a linguistic device but a pragmatic communicative tool that allows speakers to convey implicit and critical judgments. Thus, situational irony in political memes functions not only as humor but also as a medium for channeling criticism toward institutional failures and social deviance.

Semantically, situational irony is not always apparent from sentence structure but emerges from the relationship among elements in the meme: text, image, and context. Therefore, its interpretation is multimodal. Viewers must interpret meaning not only from the literal text but also from visuals and knowledge about the referenced socio-political situation. This underscores the importance of pragmatic analysis, where context is key to understanding the ironic intent.

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Dramatic Irony: Information Asymmetry as a Form of Criticism

Dramatic irony, although the least frequent, possesses a very strong critical power. In this type of irony, the reader or viewer holds more knowledge than the characters depicted in the meme. This situation creates an ironic effect because the audience realizes something that the 'characters' in the meme do not, such as issue diversion or information manipulation by authorities. The clearest example is a meme showing the quiet ratification of the Police Bill (M9) while the public is distracted by issues concerning the Military Bill or the National Football Team. This meme conveys that something important happened secretly while public attention was diverted elsewhere. The ironic effect arises because the audience is aware that they have been 'deceived' by a dominant narrative that conceals a more critical issue. This demonstrates how dramatic irony functions as a form of resistance against dominant narratives. In this context, dramatic irony contains ideological elements. The meme also mocks the absurd and tragic social reality in a cynical manner, reflecting public disappointment. One of the meanings embedded in irony is mockery, where irony carries echoes and attitudes of ridicule or disagreement (Jr & Coston, 2007). Memes act as counter-media against the dominance of information from the government or mainstream media. By embedding irony both visually and verbally, memes create a space to expose the hidden realities behind official narratives. This makes dramatic irony a smart and subversive form of political communication.

Comparison with Previous Studies

This study's findings align with and expand upon previous research on the use of irony in political memes as a form of social critique. Similar to (Milner, 2018), who emphasized memes as a mode of public discourse expressing political opinions through popular cultural symbols, this research confirms that irony—especially situational irony—is a powerful device to highlight contradictions in political realities. The dominance of situational irony echoes findings by (Dynel, 2014), who described irony as a pragmatic

tool to communicate implicit criticism by exploiting the gap between expectation and reality.

Furthermore, this study complements Attardo's (1994) assertion that irony functions not only to critique power structures but also to foster collective identity and solidarity among marginalized groups. The presence of verbal irony in the memes supports previous observations that sarcastic language is effective in delivering direct political satire. Meanwhile, the relatively fewer instances of dramatic irony resonate with findings by Jr and Coston (2007), who noted that dramatic irony's strength lies in its ability to expose concealed truths through asymmetrical knowledge.

In contrast to some studies focusing primarily on Western political memes, this research adds valuable insight into the Indonesian sociopolitical context, where irony in memes reflects unique cultural and institutional dynamics. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of literature by demonstrating how digital humor adapts to local realities while maintaining universal rhetorical strategies.

Social and Political Functions of Irony in Memes

Irony in political memes serves multiple social and political functions beyond mere entertainment. First, it acts as a subtle form of resistance and critique against power structures, allowing creators and audiences to express dissent in a way that is both accessible and impactful. By wrapping criticism in humor and ambiguity, irony lowers the risk of direct confrontation while still conveying sharp messages about corruption, hypocrisy, and social injustice.

Socially, irony fosters a sense of community and shared understanding among audiences who recognize the dissonance between appearance and reality. This shared recognition helps build collective identity and solidarity, especially among those marginalized or disillusioned by mainstream political narratives. Memes become a space where people can vent frustrations, exchange ideas, and reinforce group belonging through coded language and symbolism.

Politically, irony in memes functions as an alternative discourse that challenges official narratives and mainstream media portrayals. By highlighting contradictions and exposing the absurdity of political events or figures, memes encourage critical thinking and public engagement. The multimodal nature of memes—combining text, images, and cultural references—enhances their persuasive power, making complex political critique more digestible for a wider audience. Thus, irony in memes is not only a rhetorical device but also a strategic tool for social commentary, political participation, and cultural negotiation in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that irony is a dominant communicative strategy in political memes on social media, particularly on the Instagram account @memecomic.id. From the thirty memes analyzed, three types of irony were identified: verbal irony, situational

irony, and dramatic irony. Situational irony was the most dominant, appearing in sixteen memes, followed by eleven instances of verbal irony and three of dramatic irony. This indicates that situational irony—highlighting the discrepancy between expectations and reality—is the most frequently used technique to convey socio-political criticism in a subtle yet effective manner. From a semantic perspective, irony in memes illustrates how meaning is not only interpreted literally but is also shaped by connotative, affective, and contextual dimensions. Pragmatically, irony involves the understanding of implicature and cooperative principles in communication, where the intended meaning often contradicts the literal expression. The combination of text, imagery, and social context positions memes as a form of multimodal communication rich in hidden meaning.

The use of irony in memes not only serves as entertainment but also functions as a powerful tool of critique toward Indonesia's political dynamics. Memes become a medium for the public to express dissatisfaction, cynicism, and frustration with political institutions without direct confrontation. In the fast-paced, participatory landscape of social media, irony facilitates the widespread and efficient dissemination of political messages. This study also emphasizes that irony is not merely a stylistic device but a complex and reflective rhetorical strategy. Each type of irony plays a role in exposing social absurdities, criticizing elite hypocrisy, and highlighting systemic inequality. In the digital context, politically ironic memes serve as a form of alternative discourse, offering space for society to reflect on political realities in a critical and creative way.

This study also emphasizes that irony is not merely a stylistic device but a complex and reflective rhetorical strategy. Each type of irony plays a role in exposing social absurdities, criticizing elite hypocrisy, and highlighting systemic inequality. In the digital context, politically ironic memes serve as a form of alternative discourse, offering space for society to reflect on political realities in a critical and creative way. Thus, political memes containing irony not only illustrate the creativity of citizens in responding to socio-political issues, but also underline the importance of semantic and pragmatic studies in understanding contemporary digital communication. This research is expected to open broader avenues for linguistic inquiry into communication practices in an ever-evolving digital culture.

For future research, it is recommended to explore the use of irony in memes from other social media platforms such as Twitter or TikTok, to examine differences in rhetorical styles and strategies. Comparative studies across cultures or nations could also provide deeper insights into how irony operates in various political contexts. An interdisciplinary approach combining linguistic analysis with media studies may offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital communication dynamics.

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