

Saussurean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Meme Literal Wordplay

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i4.2575>

*Assyifa Putri Azzahra, Ujang Suyatman, Deni Suswanto^{abc}

¹²³Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: putriazzahra314@gmail.com

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to analyze the linguistic-semiotic mechanisms in visual memes featuring literal wordplay in English. The data consist of five visual memes, Butterfly, Catfish, Eggplant, Fireworks, and Bookworm, collected from digital platforms such as Google Images, Pinterest, and Facebook. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory as the primary framework, alongside Victor Raskin's Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH). The results show that memes break words down into their literal elements and visualize them, thereby creating a clash between conventional meaning and literal-visual meaning, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of signs in language and triggering incongruity that produces a humorous effect. This study contributes to linguistic semiotics by emphasizing that the arbitrariness of signs is not just a theoretical concept, but an active mechanism that enables the reinterpretation of meaning in language.

Keywords: *Meme, Wordplay, Saussure's Semiotics, Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor, Incongruity*

Article History:

Received 10th June 2026

Accepted 28th June 2026

Published 02nd July 2026



INTRODUCTION

As the primary means of communication, language is one of the most important factors influencing human life (Sanditari et al., 2024). Therefore, amid the current development of information technology, the use of language and social media has become an integral part of daily life (Arganata & Muhammad Yusuf Hamka, 2025; Nauvan et al., 2024). People use various social media platforms to share diverse information, and memes are one of the most popular formats because they are easy to spread online (Putra et al., 2023). Digital memes have evolved into a popular form of communication on social media that combines visual and verbal elements to convey meaning (Mahasneh & Bashayreh, 2021). The word 'meme' itself derives from the Greek word *mimema* (meaning 'something imitated'), which was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene" (1976) (Allifiansyah, 2017; Dawkins, 1976). Memes are form-free so people can keep creating them in various forms (Cindy, 2016), whether as images, text, or videos that spread quickly online (Adha, S.S., & Mahadian, 2021; Dwivedi, 2023). Memes can also combine images and text, which Dynel (2016) defines as image macros, visual images complemented by text elements overlaid on top of them.

Over time, memes have evolved to serve not only as entertainment, but also as a semiotic practice that explains how signs can be manipulated, reinterpreted, and creatively exploited within digital culture (Marino & Lima, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). One particularly interesting form to analyze is the visual literal wordplay meme, a type of meme that breaks down a compound word or phrase into the literal meanings of its components and then displays them visually. This form of meme is important to study because it represents a unique linguistic practice in contemporary digital communication, in which users actively exploit the internal structure of words to construct new meanings that are absurd, but still comprehensible. This phenomenon not only reflects the linguistic creativity of social media

users, but also shows how sign systems operate dynamically in the digital space, where the boundary between conventional meaning and literal meaning can be played with to generate humour and social engagement.

Wordplay is a linguistic technique that exploits linguistic ambiguity so whether through phonetic similarity, morphological structure, semantic association, or word combinations and is often used to create humour, irony, or specific rhetorical effects (Delabastita, 2016). In 'image macro' memes (Dynel, 2016), wordplay is often multimodal, as it involves a relationship between text and image that simultaneously activates more than one interpretation of meaning. Examples can be found in words such as butterfly, catfish, eggplant, fireworks, and bookworm, which are visualized according to the literal meanings of their constituent elements.

This phenomenon can be understood through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which views language as a system of signs consisting of a signifier and a signified (Saussure, 1959b). In semiotics, a sign is understood as a unity of signifier and signified. The signifier is the material form of the sign, such as words, images, colors, or other visual forms perceivable by the senses. The signified is the idea or meaning represented by that form in the mind (Efendi et al., 2023; Khadka, 2025). In common usage, the relationship between signifier and signified has been socially conventionalized so that a word like "butterfly" is immediately understood as referring to the insect, not as a combination of "butter" and "fly." However, literal wordplay memes sever this conventional connection and build a new one based on the literal structure of the word. Thus, memes not only play with linguistic forms, but also demonstrate the flexibility of the relationship between signifier and signified within the semiotic system.

Furthermore, this phenomenon is closely related to the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign proposed by Saussure. According to Saussure (1959), the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary because it is not based on a natural connection, but rather on social convention. This view is also reinforced by Chandler (2017), Mollins & Tomás (2024), and Parveen & Radhakrishnan (2024), who explain that the meaning of a sign is formed through agreement within a language community, not through a natural relationship between form and meaning. A consequence of this arbitrariness is that a word can undergo lexicalization, a process in which the word's overall meaning becomes autonomous and can no longer be derived from its constituent parts. This condition is referred to as semantic opacity, which means that the meaning of a word is no longer transparent even though its morphological elements can still be recognized. This opacity of meaning allows visual memes using literal wordplay to reinterpret words by breaking them down into their literal forms, then presenting an absurd reinterpretation that can still be understood linguistically. Danesi (2022) emphasizes that the flexibility of the sign system enables wordplay and semiotic creativity in popular culture, including in the form of digital humour.

In the context of literal wordplay memes, this reinterpretation creates a clash between the literal visual meaning and conventional linguistic expectations. The audience initially understands the word based on its established general meaning, but the visuals in the meme force them to consider other, more literal possibilities. The incongruity between initial expectations and the visuals presented creates a humorous effect. Raskin, in his Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH), explains that humour arises when two conflicting scripts or interpretations coexist simultaneously in the audience's mind. In literal wordplay memes, the audience must hold onto both the conventional meaning and the literal meaning at the same time, even though both cannot be entirely true in a normal context. This situation creates absurdity and triggers the humorous effect.

A number of previous studies have examined memes as a semiotic phenomenon from various perspectives. Juan Pablo Arrobo-Agila et al. in "The Language and Meaning of Media Memes from a Semiotic Perspective" (2025) highlight the effectiveness of memes as a form of digital communication capable of encouraging active participation when relevant to the user's experience. Additionally, Desak Putu Eka Pratiwi et al. in "Deconstructing Internet Memes through Semiotic Analysis: Unveiling Myths and Ideologies in Visual and Verbal Signs" (2023)

demonstrate that memes function as a form of communication that represents cultural values and beliefs, while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies within digital society. Meanwhile, Jemma Paek in “A Semiotic Analysis of the Canonical Image Macro Meme” (2025) analyzed canonical macro meme images as semiotic texts that possess their own language, sign systems, and form their own distinct literature. Lastly, Rika Suryaningsih in “Memes as Ideological Texts: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Political Semiotics in Digital Cultures” (2025) views memes as ideological texts that play a role in shaping and reproducing political discourse in digital spaces.

These studies indicate that memes are a complex semiotic phenomenon and have been extensively studied as a form of digital communication that carries cultural meanings, ideologies, and visual-verbal sign systems. However, research that specifically addresses the linguistic-semiotic mechanisms in visual literal wordplay memes, especially those that connect Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of the arbitrariness of the sign with Victor Raskin’s incongruity theory of humor, remains limited. Previous research has tended to focus on aspects of communication, social representation, and cultural semiotics in general. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by focusing on visual and literal wordplay memes analyzed through the lens of Saussurean semiotics and Raskin’s incongruity theory of humor. The novelty of this research lies in its effort to connect the concepts of signifier-signified, the arbitrariness of the sign, and the mechanisms of literal wordplay humor within visual memes. The specific objective of this study is to analyze how words that already have conventional meanings are decomposed back into their literal forms and realized visually in memes. This study also relates the concept of the arbitrariness of signs and the theory of incongruity humor to explain how the clash between visual literal meaning and conventional linguistic expectations produces a humorous effect.

METHOD

The research design used in this study is descriptive qualitative, which is an approach that aims to describe and interpret phenomena systematically based on data analyzed in depth (Tracy, 2019). This approach is relevant to language and semiotics research because it allows researchers to examine the process of sign meaning contextually without aiming to make statistical generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was chosen to describe the process of sign decoding, the relationship between signs and signifiers, and the incongruity between literal visual meanings and conventional linguistic expectations that creates humorous effects in literal wordplay visual memes.

This study uses Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics as the main theoretical framework to analyze how meaning is formed through the relationship between signifier and signified and how the arbitrary nature of signs allows for the reinterpretation of meaning in the context of visual memes (Chandler, 2017; Saussure, 1959b). The Saussurean approach is considered relevant because visual literal wordplay memes work by modifying the structure of the signifier, both linguistically and visually, thereby producing signifiers that deviate from conventional lexical meanings (Danesi, 2016). Contemporary semiotics studies also confirm that meaning in digital media is relational and depends on the configuration of signs in multimodal systems (Kress, 2009).

As a supporting theory, this study adopts the incongruity theory of humor, specifically The Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) developed by Raskin (1985). This theory is used to explain how the incongruity between the literal visual meaning and conventional linguistic expectations creates a humorous effect in memes (Attardo, 2017; Dynel, 2016). The integration of Saussure semiotics and incongruity theory allows for a more comprehensive analysis of memes as a linguistic practice that not only manipulates signs, but also exploits the semantic expectations of readers.

The sample data in this study consists of five visual memes depicting literal wordplay involving English compound words, namely butterfly, catfish, eggplant, fireworks, and bookworm. These memes were collected from various digital platforms, including Google

Saussurean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Meme Literal Wordplay

Images, Pinterest, and Facebook, through searches using keywords such as “literal wordplay meme” or the names of the respective compound words. These five memes were selected purposefully because each represents a relevant and diverse case of the literal wordplay phenomenon, in which the components of the compound word are interpreted literally and visualized as separate entities. The data selection criteria include three aspects: (1) the meme explicitly depicts the literal meaning of the compound word’s constituent components, (2) there is a clear tension between the conventional meaning and the visualized literal meaning, and (3) the meme can be analysed using Saussure’s sign-signifier framework and the incongruity mechanism in Raskin’s SSTH.

The data collection process in this study was conducted in two steps. First, the researcher conducted a systematic search on the online platforms Google Images, Pinterest, and Facebook using specific keywords consisting of compound word names combined with the terms “literal meme” and “wordplay meme” to obtain relevant data candidates. Second, from the collected data, the researcher applied purposive sampling by filtering memes based on three established criteria: the meme must explicitly visualize the literal meaning of the compound word’s components, showing an analysable contrast between conventional and literal meanings, and allowing for the simultaneous application of Saussure’s and Raskin’s SSTH theoretical frameworks. The result was five memes considered most representative for explaining the phenomenon of meaning reinterpretation through the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

Data analysis in this study was conducted systematically in four steps. First, the researcher identified linguistic signs in each meme using Saussure’s semiotic model, namely by mapping verbal elements (compound words) and visual elements (image representations) into signifier-signified structures to determine the conventional meaning socially agreed upon. Second, the researcher analysed literal visual reinterpretations by examining how memes break down compound words into their literal components and how those components are visualized, thereby forming alternative meanings that deviate from conventional lexical meanings. Third, the researcher examined sign relationships more deeply by studying the role of the arbitrary nature of signs in facilitating such reinterpretations that is, explaining why the absence of a natural link between word form and meaning allows for new interpretations to emerge through visual context. Fourth, the researcher interpreted the resulting humour by referring to Raskin’s SSTH, namely by identifying two semantic scripts that are active simultaneously: the conventional script and the literal script, and analysing the conflict between the two as the mechanism that produces the humorous effect in memes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Signifier-Signified

Based on the signifier-signified concept described earlier, each meme in this study is analysed by identifying the signifier and signified elements that appear in the visual and textual elements, as follows.

Butterfly Meme



Figure 1 (Data 1. By Tyler Scagliarini (imgur))

The meme presents a simple yet eye-catching visual, a solid block of yellow butter with a pair of wings attached on both sides. The butter is illustrated realistically, depicting its characteristic yellow and rectangular shape, while the wings resemble those of a butterfly in

flight. The combination of these two visually distinct elements, butter and wings, creates an imaginative figure of a block of butter that seems able to fly.

Table 1. Butterfly Meme

Signifier	Signified
	ConvenTional
Butterfly	A winged insect of the order <i>Lepidoptera</i>

In conventional English, the word “butterfly” functions as a signifier referring to the concept of a butterfly as a winged insect of the order *Lepidoptera*. This connection is well established through social convention, as English speakers immediately associate the word with the insect as a single unit of meaning. Although morphologically composed of 'butter' and 'fly', the word has undergone complete lexicalization, meaning its overall meaning is no longer derived from its individual components. Speakers no longer associate it with 'butter' or with the verb 'fly', but directly with the concept of the butterfly as a whole.

Table 2. The Concept of Butterfly

Signifier	Signified
	Decomposition
Butter	A yellow dairy product with a solid/semi-solid texture, used as a food ingredient
FLy	The verb “fly” or wings enabling flight

The meme visually represents the decomposition of the signifier 'butterfly' into 'butter' and 'fly'. Semantically, 'butter' refers to a yellow dairy product with a solid or semi-solid texture used as a food ingredient, while 'fly' is interpreted as the verb 'to fly' or as wings. This separation results in a literal reading that no longer refers to the complete conventional meaning of “butterfly”, but to a combination of butter and the concept of flying. The result is then visualized as flying butter.

Catfish Meme



Figure 2 (Data 2. By Feral Neurodivergent Raging Meme (Facebook))

This meme consists of two main elements, text and visual. The text displays the word “catfish”, while the visual depicts a hybrid creature combining the head of a cat with the body of a fish. Visual details such as eyes, whiskers, ears, scales, and fins, are rendered with care to emphasize the fusion of two biologically distinct animals into a single impossible entity. Unlike the “butterfly” meme, which presents the components side by side, this meme merges them into a single unified composite form, intensifying the sense of biological absurdity.

Table 3. Catfish

Signifier	Signified
	ConvenTional
Catfish	A species of freshwater fish with whisker-like barbels, living at the bottom of the water bodies

In conventional English, “catfish” is a signifier referring to a species of freshwater fish that has whiskers like a cat. This fish has certain biological characteristics, such as living at the

bottom of the water, having sensory whiskers to find food, having no scales, and being edible. Thus, the term “catfish” demonstrates how language functions by linking linguistic signs to a specific biological reality.

Table 4. The Catfish Demonstration

Signifier	Signified
	DeComposiTiOn
Cat	A land animal with specific physical and behavioral characteristics
Fish	An aquatic animal adapted to living in water environments

The meme visual decomposes the signifier “catfish” into 'cat' and 'fish', with 'cat' referring to a land animal and 'fish' referring to an aquatic creature. This decomposition generates an alternative interpretation, instead of a fish named for its whiskers, the meme visualizes a hybrid entity combining both animals. The result is a cat-headed fish or a cat-bodied fish, a creature that merges two distinct biological classifications with incompatible habitats and physiologies.

Eggplant Meme



Figure 3 (Data 3. By The_Zapper_48 (imgflip))

The “eggplant” meme consists of two main elements, text and visual. The text displays the word “eggplant”, while the visual depicts a cartoon illustration of a plant producing white eggs as its fruit and accompanied by a chicken nearby. The visual intentionally blurs the boundary between the plant and animal worlds by presenting a scenario in which a plant produces eggs, a product biologically exclusive to animals as its fruit. The inclusion of the chicken further anchors the egg as an animal product, sharpening the conceptual mismatch between the visual and the botanical reality of the actual vegetable.

Table 5. Eggplant Visual.

Signifier	Signified
	ConvenTional
Eggplant	A dark purple vegetable (<i>Solanum Melongena</i>), oval or round in shape, commonly used in cooking

In conventional English, "eggplant" refers to a dark purple vegetable (although there are white and green varieties) that is oval or round in shape, has a soft texture when cooked, and is used in various dishes such as ratatouille, moussaka, baba ghanoush, or stir-fried eggplant. It is the fruit of the *Solanum melongena* plant and is commonly grown as an agricultural product. Thus, “eggplant” shows that language fixes meaning through shared usage, even if the vegetable itself comes in different shapes or colours.

Table 6. Eggplant Decomposition

Signifier	Signified
	Decomposition
Egg	Oval-shaped Poultry reproductive product with a shell (white or brown shells), containing egg white and egg yolk

Plant	A living organism that performs photosynthesis, with roots, stems, leaves, and produce fruits or seeds
-------	--

The meme decomposes "eggplant" into 'egg' and 'plant'. 'Egg' refers to a poultry reproductive product and 'plant' refers to a photosynthesizing living organism. This decomposition produces a new meaning, a plant that produces eggs as its fruit. The result visualizes a botanically impossible scenario, a plant from the animal world, combining two biologically distinct categories into a single absurd image.

Fireworks Meme



Figure 4 (Data 4. By Dings & Doodles-Keren Rosen (Pinterest))

The "fireworks" meme consists of two main elements, text and visual. The text displays the word "fireworks", while the visual depicts a personified fire figure in the form of an orange-red humanoid shape seated at a desk and working on a laptop in the manner of an office worker. The fire is not simply depicted as a natural phenomenon, it is given human attributes including posture, agency, and social role.

Table 7. Fireworks Conventional

Signifier	Signified
Fireworks	Conventional Pyrotechnic devices designed to produce colorful explosions in the sky

In conventional English, "fireworks" refers to pyrotechnic devices that produce colorful explosions in the sky, typically used in celebrations such as New Year's Eve or national holidays. Fireworks produce spectacular visual effects with various colors, patterns, and loud explosions. The word is understood as a single lexical unit, and the component 'works' is no longer perceived as the verb 'to work' but as part of a compound noun referring to the pyrotechnic apparatus. This is a clear case of lexicalization: the compositional meaning has been replaced by a conventionalized whole-word meaning.

Table 8. Fireworks Decomposition

Signifier	Signified
Fire	Decomposition A chemical oxidation reaction producing heat, light, and flame; the phenomenon of combustion
Works	The verb 'to work' or the act of performing a task or labor

The meme decomposes 'fireworks' into 'fire' and 'works', where 'fire' refers to the natural phenomenon of combustion and 'works' is reinterpreted as work or the act of performing a task. This decomposition produces an alternative reading, namely fire performing labor. The result is visualized as a humanoid fire figure working on a laptop, depicting the natural phenomenon as a social agent.

Bookworm Meme

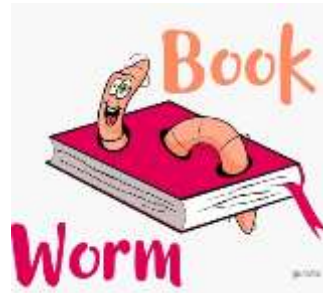


Figure 5 (Data 5. By Gandra (Redbubble))

The “bookworm” meme consists of two main elements, text and visual. The text displays the word “bookworm”, while the visual depicts a more realistic image of a worm, like an earthworm or insect larva, coming out of the pages of an open book. The realistic depiction, unlike a cartoon, grounds the visual in the biological world and takes away the metaphorical warmth usually associated with the term ‘bookworm’. Instead of a person who loves to read, the visual presents an actual pest, a worm physically inhabiting and apparently damaging a book.

Table 9. Bookworm Conventional

Signifier	Signified
	Conventional
Bookworm	An idiom or metaphor for a person who loves to read, with positive connotations

In conventional English, "bookworm" is an idiom referring to a person who loves reading intensely and spends a lot of time with books. It carries consistently positive connotations: the term implies intellectual dedication, curiosity, and a deep love of literature. The word has undergone complete lexicalization and semantic opacity, the 'worm' component is no longer associated with the invertebrate animal but is integrated entirely into the metaphorical meaning.

Table 10. Bookworm Decomposition

Signifier	Signified
	Decomposition
Book	A physical object containing written text or images, consisting of several bound pages
Worm	A Soft-bodied invertebrate with no legs, typically living in the soil

The meme decomposes “bookworm” into 'book' and 'worm', with 'book' referring to a physical text object and 'worm' referring to the actual invertebrate animal. This decomposition brings back the literal meaning that had been entirely hidden by lexicalization. The result is visualized as a worm physically coming out of a book, shifting the referent from a person who loves to read to a literal pest that damages books.

Arbitrary

Based on the concept of arbitrariness described earlier, each meme in this study is analyzed by identifying its arbitrary, as follows.

Butterfly

The word “butterfly”, which refers to a type of insect, shows that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, not natural. This can be seen in the use of different terms across various languages, such as *mariposa* (Spanish), *farfalle* (Italian), and *vlinder* (Dutch). These differences show that the relationship between a word and its meaning is determined by the linguistic conventions. Even though the word is made up of ‘butter’ and ‘fly’, speakers no longer understand it through those parts, its meaning has become a single whole word. This condition is called semantic opacity. Therefore, a meme can break down the word “butterfly” into ‘butter’ and ‘fly’ and give it a literal meaning, flying butter. Although it sounds absurd, it still makes sense in language because word meanings can change once linguistic conventions are set aside.

Catfish

The word “catfish”, which refers to a type of freshwater fish with whiskers, shows that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, not natural. This can be seen in the use of different terms across various languages, such as *poisson-chat* (French), *wels* (German), and *meerval* (Dutch). These differences show that the relationship between a word and its meaning is determined by the linguistic conventions. Even though the word is made up of ‘cat’ and ‘fish’, speakers no longer understand it through those parts, its meaning has become a single whole word. This condition is called semantic opacity. Therefore, a meme can break down the word “catfish” into ‘cat’ and ‘fish’ and give it a literal meaning, a hybrid creature with a cat-headed fish or a cat-bodied fish. Although it sounds absurd, it still makes sense in language because word meanings can change once linguistic conventions are set aside.

Eggplant

The word “eggplant”, which refers to a dark purple vegetable, shows that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, not natural. This can be seen in the use of different terms across various languages, such as *melanzana* (Italian), *terong* (Indonesian), and *aubergine* (British English). These differences show that the relationship between a word and its meaning is determined by the linguistic conventions. Even though the word is made up of ‘egg’ and ‘plant’, speakers no longer understand it through those parts, its meaning has become a single whole word. This condition is called semantic opacity. Therefore, a meme can break down the word “eggplant” into ‘egg’ and ‘plant’ and give it a literal meaning, a plant that produces eggs as its fruit. Although it sounds absurd, it still makes sense in language because word meanings can change once linguistic conventions are set aside.

Fireworks

The word “fireworks”, which refers to pyrotechnic devices designed to produce colorful explosions in the sky, shows that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, not natural. This can be seen in the use of different terms across various languages, such as *kembang api* (Indonesian), *feu d’artifice* (French), and *vuurwerk* (Dutch). These differences show that the relationship between a word and its meaning is determined by the linguistic conventions. Even though the word is made up of ‘fire’ and ‘works’, speakers no longer understand it through those parts, its meaning has become a single whole word. This condition is called semantic opacity. Therefore, a meme can break down the word “fireworks” into ‘fire’ and ‘works’ and give it a literal meaning, fire performing labor. Although it sounds absurd, it still makes sense in language because word meanings can change once linguistic conventions are set aside.

Bookworm

The word “bookworm”, which refers to an idiom or metaphor for a person who loves to read, shows that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, not natural. This can be seen in the use of different terms across various languages, such as *bokmal* (Swedish), *leseratte* (German), and *boekenwurm* (Dutch). These differences show that the

relationship between a word and its meaning is determined by the linguistic conventions. Even though the word is made up of 'book' and 'worm', speakers no longer understand it through those parts, its meaning has become a single whole word. This condition is called semantic opacity. Therefore, a meme can break down the word "bookworm" into 'book' and 'worm' and give it a literal meaning, coming out of the pages of an open book or pest that damages books. Although it sounds absurd, it still makes sense in language because word meanings can change once linguistic conventions are set aside.

Incongruity

Based on the concept of incongruity between conventional and literal meanings explained earlier, each meme in this study is analyzed by identifying the humorous effects that arise, as follows.

Butterfly

Condition 1: Dual Compatibility

Script 1 (Conventional): "Butterfly" refers to a winged insect that undergoes metamorphosis and often lands on flowers. This is the dominant, conventionally activated script when English speakers encounter the word.

Script 2 (Literal): The meme activates a second script by breaking 'butterfly' into 'butter' and 'fly', creating the meaning of 'flying butter'. The visual, a block of butter with wings, works as the punchline that triggers this reinterpretation and makes the audience reinterpret their first understanding. The semantic incongruity arises because these two scripts are mutually incompatible: an insect and a flying dairy product cannot co-exist as a single referent. The gap between what the audience expects (an insect) and what the visual presents (butter with wings) generates the humorous effect.

Condition 2: Script Opposition

Table 11. Script Opposition of Butterfly

Actual vs. Non-actual	
Butterfly falls into the actual category because it actually exists and can be observed directly. In everyday conversation, the word "butterfly" is automatically understood to refer to a winged insect that actually exists in nature.	The combination "butter + fly" falls into the non-actual category because it is never used as a single unit of meaning in everyday language. There is no common context in which the word "butterfly" refers to both butter and a fly at the same time.
Possible vs. Impossible	
Butterfly falls into the possible category because it actually exists. The audience can observe and interact with them directly in nature.	The combination 'butter + fly' falls into the impossible category because it cannot form a single, real entity. 'Butter' is a non-living food product, while 'fly' functions as a verb of action, so the two cannot combine to form a biological or ontological object in the real world. This meaning appears only as a humorous or absurd construct.

Catfish

Condition 1: Dual Compatibility

Script 1 (Conventional): "Catfish" refers to a real freshwater fish with whiskers, living in rivers or lakes and commonly consumed as food. This conventional meaning is automatically activated when English speakers encounter the word.

Script 2 (Literal): The meme activates a second script by decomposing 'catfish' into 'cat' and 'fish' and visualizing them as a single hybrid creature. The semantic incongruity arises from the tension between two categorically incompatible domains: the conventional biological entity (a real fish) and the literal hybrid (a cat-fish creature). The visual punchline, the merged creature, makes the incompatibility explicit and triggers the humorous effect by violating both biological possibility and linguistic convention simultaneously.

Condition 2: Script Opposition

Table 12. Script Opposition of Catfish

Actual vs. Non-Actual	
Catfish falls into the actual category because it actually exists and can be observed directly. In everyday conversation, the word "catfish" is automatically understood to refer to a real animal that actually exists in water so its literal meaning refers to an actual biological entity.	The combination "cat + fish" falls into the non-actual category because it is never used as a single unit of meaning in everyday language.
Possible vs. Impossible	
Catfish falls into the possible category because it actually exists in the wild. The audience can see and interact directly with catfish in rivers or freshwater bodies.	The "cat-fish" hybrid falls into the impossible category because it is biologically impossible. A cat and a fish cannot combine into a single, logical entity in the real world so this term exists only as a humorous or absurd construct.

Eggplant

Condition 1: Dual Compatibility

Script 1 (Conventional): "Eggplant" refers to a dark purple vegetable (although there are white and green varieties) used in cooking, automatically understood as a single culinary concept by English speakers.

Script 2 (Literal): The meme activates a second script by decomposing 'eggplant' into 'egg' and 'plant' and visualizing a plant that produces eggs as its fruit. The semantic incongruity is generated by the tension between two categorically incompatible domains: the botanical (a real vegetable) and the animal-botanical hybrid (a plant bearing animal eggs). The presence of the chicken in the visual further anchors the 'egg' component to the animal world, making the categorical transgression explicit and intensifying the humorous effect.

Condition 2: Script Opposition

Table 13. Dual Compatibility of Eggplant

Actual vs. Non-Actual	
Eggplant falls into the actual category because it is a real vegetable that actually exists. In everyday conversation, the word "eggplant" is automatically understood to refer to the dark purple (or white and green) oval-shaped vegetable that can be used in cooking.	The combination "egg + plant" falls into the non-actual category because it is never used as a single unit of meaning in everyday language.
Possible vs. Impossible	
Eggplant as a vegetable is biologically possible and does indeed exist. Eggplant grows from the <i>Solanum melongena</i> plant, can be grown in gardens or fields, and can be harvested and consumed. This is a phenomenon that is consistent with the laws of biology and botany.	The combination of "egg + plant" falls into the category of the impossible because it is biologically and ontologically impossible. 'Eggs' are the reproductive products of animals, while 'plants' produce fruit that contains seeds. Combining the two violates basic taxonomic categories so this term exists only as a humorous or absurd construct.

Fireworks

Condition 1: Dual Compatibility

Script 1 (Conventional): "Fireworks" refers to pyrotechnic devices that produce colorful explosions in the sky during celebrations. This is the dominant script automatically activated by the word.

Script 2 (Literal): The meme activates a second script by reinterpreting 'fire' as the natural phenomenon and 'works' as professional labor, yielding the meaning of 'fire working

Saussurean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Meme Literal Wordplay

at a laptop'. The semantic incongruity is generated across three dimensions: physical (fire cannot sit), biological (fire is not a living being), and social (fire cannot be employed). The visual punchline, the humanoid fire worker, makes all three violations simultaneously explicit, compounding the incongruity and intensifying the humorous effect.

Condition 2: Script Opposition

Table 14. Script Opposition of Fireworks

Actual vs. Non-Actual	
"Fireworks" falls into the actual category because it actually exists. In everyday conversation, the word "fireworks" is automatically understood to refer to pyrotechnic devices that produce spectacular visual effects with various colors, patterns, and loud explosions in the sky.	The combination "fire + works" falls into the non-actual category because it is never used as a single unit of meaning in everyday language.
Possible vs. Impossible	
"Fireworks" fall into the possible category because they actually exist physically, can be created, and can be seen at celebrations.	The combination "fire + works" falls into the category of the impossible when viewed from various perspectives. Physically, fire does not have a solid form that can sit in a chair. Biologically, fire is not a living being that has consciousness or the ability to perform purposeful actions. Socially, fire cannot be a professional worker, cannot have a job, and cannot use a computer.

Bookworm

Condition 1: Dual Compatibility

Script 1 (Conventional): "Bookworm" refers to a metaphor for people who love to read, carrying positive connotations of intellectual dedication and enthusiasm for books. This is the dominant script automatically activated by the term.

Script 2 (Literal): The meme activates a second script by decomposing "bookworm" into 'book' and 'worm' and visualizing a real invertebrate coming out of a book's pages. The semantic incongruity is generated not only by the mismatch between the metaphorical and literal meanings, but also by a connotative reversal: the conventional script is positively coded (admired reader), while the literal script is negatively coded (destructive pest). This double incongruity, semantic and connotative, makes the bookworm meme particularly rich in humorous potential, as the audience must simultaneously process the valued human activity of reading and its replacement by an organism that destroys the very object of that activity.

Condition 2: Script Opposition

Table 15. Script Opposition of Bookworm

Actual vs. Non-Actual	
"Bookworm" falls into the actual category because it refers to a person who loves to read. In everyday conversation, the word "bookworm" is automatically associated with that metaphor.	The combination "book + worm" falls into the non-actual category because it is never used as a single unit of meaning in everyday language.
Possible vs. Impossible	
"Bookworm" falls into the "possible" category because that metaphor, referring to a person who loves to read, actually exists.	The combination "book + worm" falls into the category of the impossible because, biologically and ontologically, it cannot exist. "Book" as a physical object and "worm" as a worm (an invertebrate animal). Combining the two violates established idiomatic conventions. This meaning appears only as a humorous or absurd construct.

Discussion

The findings of this analysis indicate that Saussure semiotic theory and Raskin's SSTH can be used to explain the linguistic mechanisms at work in digital memes. In visual memes featuring literal wordplay, the relationship between the signifier and the signified does not

only form one meaning, but two meanings that emerge simultaneously. Words such as butterfly, catfish, eggplant, fireworks, and bookworm are initially understood as a single established unit of meaning in everyday usage. However, memes break these words down into their constituent elements, then reconnect them with the literal meanings of each component through visuals. As a result, two signifier-signified relationships operate simultaneously, the conventional meaning and a literal-visual meaning that is different from the common understanding. This reinterpretation shows that the relationship between word form and meaning is not fixed, but can be reconstructed due to the arbitrary nature of signs in language. This condition then opens up space for memes to bring back literal meanings that were previously hidden in everyday language use.

This arbitrariness is seen in the variation of word forms across different languages. For example, the concept of “butterfly” can be expressed as *mariposa* in Spanish, *farfalle* in Italian, or *vlinder* in Dutch. These differences in form indicate that there is no natural connection between a word’s form and its meaning. Furthermore, the process of lexicalization makes the literal meanings of the word’s constituent elements no longer apparent to speakers, thereby creating semantic opacity. Memes then exploit this condition by reactivating the hidden literal meanings through processes of decomposition and visualization. Consequently, the resulting reinterpretations may sound absurd, but they are still linguistically comprehensible. It is this process of reinterpretation that subsequently creates a clash between the meaning the audience expects and the literal representation displayed visually.

This clash creates an incongruity, a mismatch between conventional meaning and literal representation within the meme. Each meme presents a different form of this incongruity. In the case of the “butterfly” and “catfish” memes, for example, there is a violation of biological categories because the elements that make up the words are visualized literally as a combination of two distinct entities. In the “eggplant” meme, the incongruity arises from the combination of animal and plant elements. Meanwhile, in the “fireworks” meme, fire is visualized as a being with a body, performing actions, and possessing a social role, thereby violating multiple aspects of representation simultaneously. As for “bookworm”, a positive metaphor is reinterpreted literally, shifting into an ironic or even negative connotation. Although these forms of incongruity are different, all memes use the same mechanism, bringing together two conflicting meanings simultaneously. It is this clash between the audience’s linguistic expectations and the literal visual that produces the humorous effect in these memes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that humor in visual literal wordplay memes does not arise randomly, but rather follows a regular linguistic-semiotic mechanism. According to Saussure, the arbitrary nature of signs means that the relationship between words and meanings is based only on social agreement. This opens up opportunities for memes to decompose conventional meanings and reactivate previously hidden literal meanings. This is where incongruity arises, the clash between two incompatible meanings produces a humorous effect, as explained in Raskin’s SSTH. Thus, visual literal wordplay memes are not merely digital entertainment, but also concrete proof of how the fundamental nature of language, arbitrariness, operates in practice.

REFERENCES

- Adha, S.S., & Mahadian, A. B. (2021). Analisis Meme Politik Among Us #DPRIMPOSTOR (Analisis Semiotika Meme Among Us #DPRIMPOSTOR Dalam Perbincangan Isu Politik Di Twitter). *Telkom University*.
- Allifiansyah, S. (2017). Kaum Muda, Meme, dan Demokrasi Digital di Indonesia. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 13(2), 151-164. <https://doi.org/10.24002/jik.v13i2.676>
- Arganata, Z., & Muhammad Yusuf Hamka. (2025). Pengaruh media sosial terhadap pola komunikasi generasi Z dalam interaksi social. *Jurnal Dinamika Sosial Dan Sains*, 2(1), 412-

416. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.60145/jdss.v2i1.114>

Attardo, S. (2017). *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (illustrate). Walter de Gruyter.

Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The Basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Cindy, N. (2016). Representasi Meme Jomblo Dalam Situs Jejaring Sosial Twitter (Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes). *KOM FISIP*, 3(2).

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design (4th ed.)* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Danesi, M. (2016). *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Danesi, M. (2022). *Memes, Emojis, and Other Digital Signs*. Nova Science Publishers.

Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press.

Delabastita, dirk. (2016). *Wordplay and Translation* (1st Editio). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315538280>

Dwivedi, S. K. (2023). Social Media Memes: A Study Of Its Impact On Intercultural Communications. *International Journal of Development Research*, 13(1), 61307–61311. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.26159.01.2023>

Dynel, M. (2016). "I Has Seen Image Macros!" Advice Animals Memes as Visual-Verbal Jokes. *International Journal of Communication*, 2016(10).

Efendi, E., Siregar, I. M., & Harahap, R. R. (2023). Semiotika Tanda dan Makna. *Da'watuna: Journal of Communication and Islamic Broadcasting*, 4(1), 154–163. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.47467/dawatuna.v4i1.3329>

Khadka, T. B. (2025). Integrating Verbal and Visual Signs in Meaning Making: A Semiotic Analysis. *Spectrum of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 147–158. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3126/shss.v1i1.79838>

Kress, G. (2009). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203970034>

Mahasneh, A. A., & Bashayreh, H. (2021). A Semiotic Translation of Memes: Trump's Visit to Saudi Arabia as a Case Study. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 10(4), 32–42. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2021-0096>

Marino, G., & Lima, C. A. R. (2018). Semiótica da propagabilidade: Uma abordagem sistemática de memes e virais de Internet. *Revista Ícone*, 16(1), 9–41. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.34176/icone.v16i1.237495>

Mollins, A., & Tomás, M. (2024). Emergence of Non-summative Relations in Language. *Signifiances (Signifying)*, 7(1), XVIII–XXXIV. <https://doi.org/10.52497/signifiances.v7i1.359>

Nauvan, M. Z., Zamzami, R., Nafais, M., Azmi, Z., & Afwan, M. (2024). Dampak Teknologi Digital Terhadap Perilaku Sosial Generasi Muda. *TECHSI: Jurnal Teknik Informatika*, 15(2), 87–95. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.29103/techsi.v15i2.19443>

Parveen, A., & Radhakrishnan, V. (2024). Sign, Signifier and Signified in Schrödinger's Box. *MethodsX*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mex.2024.103047>

Putra, A. S., Aditriyana, M. R., Widya, N. S., & Nurhadi, Z. F. (2023). Meme Politik Sebagai Representasi Komunikasi Kritis Di Media Sosial. *Jurnal Syntax Fusion*, 3(9), 981–993. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.54543/fusion.v3i09.363>

Sanditari, S., Sakinah, R. M. N., & Fauziyah, S. W. (2024). A Semiotic Analysis Of The Enola Holmes Movie (2020) Using Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory. *TheGist: Jurnal Sastra Dan Bahasa*, 7(2), 40–51. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.53675/gist.v7i2.1391>

Saussure, F. de. (1959a). *Course in General Linguistics*. Columbia University Press.

Saussure, F. de. (1959b). *Course in General Linguistics (Translated from the French by Wade Baskin)* (C. Bally & A. Reidlinger (Eds.)). The Philosophical Library.

Tracy, S. J. (2019). *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact, 2nd Edition*. John Wiley & Sons.

Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. Routledge.