Memeing to Learning: Exploring Meaning-Making in a Language-Learning Chat Group

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Abstract

Meaning-making in a new era increasingly defined by digital communication is a complicated ensemble of both verbal and non-verbal modes. Following this trend of conveying information multimodally, digital memes have become a new and viral way to communicate and make meaning. Memeing, as a multimodal and social practice, may hold potential for language learners. This study explores the impact of memes on second language learning, examining how memes support meaning-making and language learning during intercultural encounters in an online chat group. Using a case study design, this article focuses on three Chinese L2 learners varying in language proficiency, learning motivation, and memeing engagement. The naturally-occurring memeing data (from 2016 to 2018) of a university-level student-run Chinese-English intercultural chat group was collected and analyzed together with individual interviews. The findings show that meaning-making and language learning were empowered by memeing in the intercultural chat group through remixing linguacultural messages, constructing identities, and developing social connections. This study concludes with meme-related pedagogical activities and a discussion of future research.

Keywords: second language learning, memes, identity, multimodality, language play, digital literacies.

Introduction

With the emergence of networking technologies and globalization, the contexts, means and needs of foreign language learning have been greatly transformed (Kern, 2014). Digital technologies such as web 2.0 and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have changed the way people communicate, and most importantly, the ways in which language is used and how information is presented (Williams, 2009). Digital technologies enhance the level of complexity and dynamism of meaning potentials in the new era by enriching semiotic resources available in the virtual world. Meaning-making practices online are complicated ensembles of both verbal and non-verbal modes—language, image, animated movement, sound, 3D objects, etc. With these new ways of processing information and understanding the world, playing with semiotic resources has become a theme of communication, especially in the

digital world.

Following this trend, digital memes, a new way to communicate, have become contagious online. The term meme was introduced by Dawkins (1976), who described memes as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, then gradually result in a shared social phenomenon. In the 2013 book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman offers a definition of internet memes by connecting Dawkins's idea with digital culture and web 2.0: memes are "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (2013, p.41). In this study, the term *meme* specifically refers to internet/digital memes that usually take the form of an image or GIF with text. The act of sharing, reproducing and/or creating memes is called 'memeing'. In other words, memeing refers to meaning-making through memes. The decoding and encoding skills needed for memeing include not only the ability to interpret the words, but also the ability to decipher the information hidden behind the interplay of semiotic resources (e.g., humor, cultural significance, etc.). In foreign language learning settings, being able to read, reply, reproduce or even create memes in L2 means that the learner has not only linguistic competence but also symbolic competence through a variety of modalities (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) that encompasses intercultural and communicative competence. As the Douglas Fir Group (2016) states, "language learning is semiotic learning" (p. 27). The richer the meaningful semiotic practices situated in social contexts that L2 learners are given access to, the greater the possibilities of enriching L2 learners' evolving semiotic repertoire. Memeing, as a socially situated semiotic practice, might have potential to contribute to second language learning. However, there is a lack of research on memes in fostering language learning.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the role of memes in meaning-making and their affordances in language learning through three Chinese L2 learners who participated in an online intercultural chat group. Naturally-occurring memeing data and semi-structured interviews were collected and analyzed. This study sheds new light on how memes could support meaning-making in a digitally mediated intercultural group and how memeing could empower L2 learners and open new possibilities in language learning.

Theoretical Perspective

Two theoretical perspectives were integrated to understand memeing in the Chinese-English intercultural chat group as a multimodal and social practice. Multimodality framework is based on the assumption that meanings can be constructed from modes that integrate different social semiotic resources (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010). The fact that memes, as multimodal artifacts, can help learners exploit semiotic modes beyond the verbal leads to the speculation that non-linguistic modes can scaffold the acquisition of linguacultural knowledge within socially constructed contexts. Such perspectives highlight the multimodal nature of memes mediated by sociocultural factors. A foreign language play perspective views language play as both a recreational social activity as well as a reflection of high linguistic and pragmatic proficiency (Belz & Reinhardt, 2004). For the focal Chinese L2 learners, memeing provided them with a multimodal and playful way of meaning-making when they were socialized into the chat group community. Together, these two theoretical perspectives offer us a more comprehensive lens to understand memeing as a complicated multimodal meaning-making process during socialization into a Chinese-English intercultural online chat group community.

Multimodality: Social Semiotics

A multimodality framework draws upon social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) to consider meaning-making as a dynamic social practice and looks at meaning-making in different

semiotic modes, such as the linguistic, visual, gestural or aural. Within these frameworks, it is argued that different semiotic modes work together through the selection of resources available for meaning to be made. According to Kress (2010), multimodality is "the normal state of human communication" (p.1).

Internet and social networks now function as sites of cosmopolitan practice where young people can productively and creatively engage in multimodal meaning-making within local and global contexts (Hull et al, 2010). For example, Chen (2013) investigated the Facebook literacy practices of two L2 English multilingual writers and found that they made use of technological affordances of Facebook to participate in multimodal meaning-making that allowed them to navigate across languages, cultures, modes and identities to strategically engage readers at local and global levels. In a recent study that focused on a French L2 learner's vlogs on YouTube, Codreanu and Combe (2018) examined the content and the comments of the vlogs. They argued that vlogs, as a multimodal way of communicating, have the advantage of allowing learners to interact with people around the world, to show how cultural differences are perceived and to construct multiple identities through vlogging. From these studies and other related work (e.g., Black, 2009; Kim, 2016), we see that multimodality empowers L2 learners to become active global communicators in today's connected world.

In order to understand this multimodal, multicultural communication that young people are currently engaged in, we need to consider the kinds of practices, texts, modes, symbol systems, and interlocutors situated in social contexts. Multimodality theory recognizes that different modes have different functions, and they are shaped by cultural and social lives. It also acknowledges that meaning lies in social rules and people are social agents who actively decide the meaning of signs in a social context. A multimodal approach to studying memeing emphasizes its affordances of meaning-making through multiple modes and in various contexts. Memes, by their very nature, are multimodal artifacts. They usually combine linguistic and visual resources, sometimes movements (GIF) together. Linguistic codes and visual modes carry their own culture-specific affordances in meaning-making. People actively participate in memeing through selection and arrangement of existing resources to create new meanings. Reading, sharing, and reproducing memes offers opportunities to mix languages and cultures through multiple modes. Thus, it has expanded the ways in which language learners interpret and create meaning. A goal of the current study is to explore how memes support meaning-making with their multimodal affordances in an intercultural context mediated by digital tools.

Foreign Language Play

Language play is often observed in early childhood language development (Chukovsky, 1968; Pellegrini, 1981). Children are found to use language as a resource for play, which indicates a metalinguistic awareness critical to the development of language and communicative competence (Cazden, 1976). One could argue that language play might also indicate an important metalinguistic awareness in adult second language learning. However, adult language play in a second language during their language proficiency development has been an underexplored phenomenon. The first scholar to purpose an adult foreign language play theory was Lantolf (1997). Adopting a sociocultural lens, Lantolf (1997, 2000) argued that adult L2 learners engage in language play as a function of rehearsal and internalization. Through internalizing rules from their language play encounters in social contexts, L2 learners develop a higher-level of language skills and awareness of language forms.

Early studies tended to focus on language play and the acquisition of language forms (Lantolf, 1997). As Crystal (1996, p. 328), through the observation of children, defined language play as occurring "when people manipulate the forms and functions of language as a source of fun for themselves and/or for the people they are with", applied linguists who studied adult foreign language play also assumed

that language play facilitated the acquisition of forms and grammars (Lantolf, 1997, 2000). Cook (2000) theoretically expanded the notion of language play by including not only linguistic (form) play, but also semantic play and pragmatic play. As the field of foreign language play evolves, more researchers have started to focus on the social dimension of foreign language play (e.g., Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004). For example, Belz and Reinhardt (2004) documented adult foreign language play mediated by CMC and emphasized the importance of interpersonal domain of language use. Their research revealed that a German L2 learner engaged in language play online in order to gain social rapport, exercise creativity, and present a positive face. They also suggested that "new technologies may afford new kinds of language play" (p. 354) based on their observation that digital technologies offered the hybridity of linguistic modes (speech, written forms, etc.).

In summary, current foreign language play research calls for a shifting focus on the sociocultural dimension and seeks emerging affordances provided by digital technologies. In the current study, memeing will be examined through a sociocultural lens and documented as a new kind of multimodal foreign language play mediated and expanded by digital tools.

Research on Memes and Language Learning

The concept of memes originated from biology (Dawkins, 1976, 1981). The replicability of genes enables them to increase in numbers and get passed on from generation to generation (Heylighen, 1996). Dawkins (1976), who suggested that such mechanisms also apply to cultural information, introduced memes as cultural genes that contagiously get passed from mind to mind and scale into a shared social phenomenon (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2013). Internet memes share similar characteristics in that they carry information, spread in a fast and contagious way in an environment we call digital culture and have already become a shared pattern of communication and culture in this era—this explains why they are also called "memes." They are genes of ideas in digital culture.

Building upon Shifman (2013)'s definition, I generalize a definition of internet memes as: a group of digital items as a new way of communication that usually combines visual and linguistic forms (moving or non-moving images together with texts); they are designed to express original ideas through remixing existing cultural artifacts and languages, usually in a humorous way; they are created, circulated, and spread around the society by means of technologies; their ideas sometimes can convey rich and complex information such as language, culture, identity, emotion, history, politics and so on. The act of meaning-making through memes (e.g., sharing, creating, remixing) is called 'memeing'. Such a potentially rich content conveyed by memes should interest and raise the attention of researchers from different areas to tackle the question marks in the field of memes.

The field of memes remains a relatively new, understudied area full of challenges and potentials. Its multimodal interaction between language and image has attracted some linguists to study this phenomenon. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) adopted a construction grammar approach to analyze several popular internet memes in order to explore their multimodal properties and expand the scope of cognitive linguistics. They explained the replicability of memes from a linguistic perspective, focusing mainly on the use of linguistic resources in multimodal context. They attributed the popularity of memes to constructional meaning and compositionality as well as emotional and experiential needs in communication. Some scholars in literacy education have also started to take the pedagogical potentials of memes into consideration. Knobell and Lankshear (2007) suggested bringing memes into classrooms as a new critical literacy practice by analyzing the process and effect of memes. They argued that analysis and dissection of memes can help students develop a critical mind to decipher this shared social participation and cultural production generated by memeing. Following the theoretical standpoint in Knobell and Lankshear's work (2007), Harvey and Palese (2018) proposed a pedagogical

practice of developing critical memetic literacy to help students navigate the internet and their media lives. These studies are essential to the foundation of a literature of memes, linguistics, and education. However, there is a huge gap between the linguistic value and the educational value of memes. Few studies have been done in foreign language learning and memes. The fact that memes can help learners exploit the interplay of semiotic modes beyond the verbal and that memeing is a playful social activity shows its potential in fostering language learning.

The current study was designed to build upon the field's limited understanding of memes by turning much needed attention to second language learning. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do memes support meaning-making in an intercultural language-learning chat group?
2. How does memeing contribute to linguacultural learning of the Chinese L2 learners?

Methods

To address this underdeveloped area of research, a multiple-case study design (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018) was employed to gain insight into the roles of memes in second language learning.

Context and Participants

Participants of this study were selected from a student-run Chinese-English intercultural club at a US university in a northeastern city. The intercultural club is a voluntary student-run group that brings together Chinese native speakers and Chinese L2 learners of the selected university for language learning and intercultural communication. The group members meet face to face once a week for voluntary get-together activities (e.g., board games, movies, etc.). Apart from the offline activities, there is an online chat group called "Third Space" created in WeChat (a mobile messaging app) as a virtual community of the intercultural club. In the chat group, Chinese L2 learners and their peer Chinese native speakers actively engaged in digitally mediated meaning-making practices. There were 321 members in the online chat group (October, 2018). Due to the richness of naturally-occurring meaning-making practices of the "Third Space" chat group, the online chat group was chosen as the site of research. Among the meaning-making practices emerged in the intercultural chat group, memeing was the most salient multimodal way of communicating and the focus of this study.

Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), three focal Chinese L2 learners (English L1 speakers) in the intercultural chat group were chosen for in-depth analysis of their memeing practices and perception of memeing and language learning. Online observations and recruitment messages in WeChat helped to identify focal participants. As described in the following section, my focal participants varied in language proficiency, learning motivations, learning strategies and memeing engagement.

Focal participant #1: Freddy

Freddy (all names pseudonyms), originally from Buffalo, had the highest Chinese proficiency among the focal participants. Having been learning Chinese for 13 years, he considered himself not only a Chinese L2 learner, but also a Chinese language educator. He was a graduate student majoring in teaching Chinese as a second language. Apart from a teacher identity, he had another identity that he valued. He told me that he was a "洋女婿" (foreign son-in-law in a Chinese family) and using Chinese with his family had become part of his life. He described his relationship with Chinese as "I'm living Chinese instead of just learning Chinese." As the founder of the intercultural club, Freddy wanted to create a space for Chinese learners at the university and their peer Chinese native speakers to

communicate and make friends. He believed that "the backbone of learning languages is using it, with the native speakers." As a result, Freddy's primary role in the chat group was that of lead organizer—someone who organized offline activities and helped engage members in the chat group. His meme use was very native-like—he often used popular Chinese memes that Chinese young people would use on social media.

Focal participant #2: Vicky

Vicky was a big meme lover and user. As an intermediate Chinese L2 learner, she had learned Chinese for two years, mainly in Chinese classrooms, including a two-month study abroad sojourn in Shanghai. Outside of classroom, she enjoyed chatting in the group chat and participating in offline club activities because she liked "this authentic way of learning, through doing, as opposed to the structure of classroom learning." She started learning Chinese because her best friend back in her hometown was a Chinese heritage speaker. She also believed that learning Chinese could help her with her travels in Chinese-speaking countries. She was active in the online chat group because she felt that "it's a very non-threatening environment to practice Chinese." Additionally, she possessed the highest memeing engagement among the focal participants. She particularly shared lots of "Chinglish" memes in the chat group. She also once created her own meme by using her own recordings and shared it in the chat group.

Focal participant #3: Brent

Brent was also an advanced Chinese L2 learner who majored in teaching Chinese as a second language in graduate college. He had the most overseas living and working experience among all the participants—he had worked in China for more than 5 years before he came back to US to pursue further studies. He officially started learning Chinese when he was a freshman in university because his father was Chinese; however, as he described, his father spoke Chinese to him "just sometimes." His wife was also from China; however, he described her as "not very interested in internet and slang." Defining himself as a "funny" person, Brent liked to make jokes and share humorous memes in the chat group. He and Vicky were the two participants who had ever created an original meme and shared it in the chat group.

Researcher Positionality Statement

I joined the intercultural club and online chat group in 2016. I am originally from China and was pursuing my studies in second language acquisition. I became friends with Freddy, who was the founder and organizer of the club at that time. I helped him with advertising the intercultural club on campus. Apart from that participation, I only attended offline meetings once and I was not active in the online chat group. I approached Freddy about the study, and he helped me with identifying focal participants. He also volunteered to become one of the participants. Positioning myself as a participant observer (Spradely, 1980), my primary role in the chat group was that of observer—with the main focus on observing and collecting data.

Data Collection

Data from different sources were collected in order to construct a multidimensional understanding of the use and perception of memes.

Observations, Artifacts and Documentation

With my participants' permission, I observed their meaning-making practices in the chat group from

December 2016 to October 2018, focusing primary on memeing practices. I took screenshots and collected all the memes they used in the chat group with timestamps. In order to gain a holistic understanding of memeing, I made *memeing transcripts* (n=61) that include the meme, context in which the meme was used, the meme sender, the meme reader(s) and the excerpt of the conversation (see Transcript 1 as an example).

Transcript 1

Meme	Context	Meme sender	Audience participated	Excerpt
	The Mid-Autumn Festival is a harvest festival celebrated by Chinese People. A mooncake is the pastry traditionally eaten during the festival. This meme was created and sent out in the group chat on the day of Mid-Autumn Festival by an advanced Chinese L2 learner.	An advanced Chinese L2 learner/user (**B**) who is now living and working in China. He joined the group chat when he was a graduate student at the university. The meme was created by him.	Chinese L2 learners/users (**L**): 3 Chinese native speakers (**N**): 5	**B**-[the meme] **L1**-Happy Mid Autumn Day to you all! **N1**-Midterm festival haha **N2**-中秋节快乐! 😊😊(*Happy Mid-Autumn Festival!*😊😊) **L2**-祝大家中秋节快乐! 👍🌟🌕 (*I wish you all a happy Mid-Autumn Festival* 🌕👍🌟🌕) **N3**-大家中秋快乐！！快去赏月！(*Happy Mid-Autumn Festival to you all! !Let's go enjoy the moon!*) **N4**-and happy mid-term festival haha **N5**-中秋快乐😊(*Happy Mid-Autumn Festival* 😊) **L3**- [photo of mooncake] 祝大家中秋节快乐！！😊 (*Happy Mid-Autumn Festival to you all!!* 😊)

Figure 1 *"Mooncake day" memeing, October 4, 2017*

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews (see Appendix A for interview questions) with my focal participants that lasted approximately two hours each, to learn about their language learning background, process and reflection on meme use, memeing experiences, language learning experiences, their attitudes towards memes and how memeing affected their language learning experiences. The interviews were conducted via WeChat, a multimodal messaging platform that allows for video, voice, text, visual chat at the same time. The participants were given freedom to choose the linguistic codes (e.g., English, Chinese, Chinglish) and semiotic modes (e.g., audio, video, text) during the interviews. All the interviews were captured via screen recording to preserve their multimodal quality. Multimodal transcripts (Flewitt et al., 2009) were prepared for each interview.

Data Analysis

I adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and cross-case synthesis approach (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018) in this study.

Phase 1: a combination of inductive coding and deductive mapping

Based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I first analyzed all the data (including memes, memeing transcripts, screenshots and interview data) through several rounds of reading, identifying, pattern-matching and coding in order to distinguish emerging patterns and initial themes in the data. I then mapped the initial themes onto the two dimensions (multimodal and social). These themes included "memes to learn current slang," "memes to raise sociocultural awareness," "memes to remix

languages and cultures," "memes to construct identities," "memes to express feelings," "memes to connect in the community," "memes to be fun and playful," and "memes to build friendship" (see Appendix B).

Phase 2: within-case analysis

Next, I focused analysis on one focal participant at a time in order to initially identify the within-case patterns (Yin, 2018) to tackle my research questions on how memeing supported their meaning-making and language learning. I openly coded interviews first, with an initial understanding of their perspectives, then moved to code their practice data. It was an iterative process in which I moved back and forth across these data sources. This process helped me gain a deeper understanding of emerging themes and how individuals view and use memes in different ways.

Phase 3: comparative case analysis

After drawing some tentative conclusion about these within-case patterns in each case, I conducted a comparative case analysis (Stake, 2006) that involved comparing individual themes and patterns among the participants, examining whether there were replicative relationships across cases, and identifying important differences among the cases. It became clear that both meaning-making and language learning in the intercultural chat group were empowered by memeing. Through this process of looking for similarities as well as noting unique differences, I ultimately developed three main themes to answer the research questions.

Findings

Memeing, as a multimodal, social, and playful meaning-making practice, was found to be of potential if L2 learners were aware of its affordances during their language learning trajectories. This section is organized by three central themes to answer the research questions on how memes supported and empowered meaning-making and L2 learning in an intercultural chat group. The three main themes were: 1) remixing linguacultural messages through memes, 2) constructing identities through memes and 3) developing social connections through memes. Each theme is explained with illustrative examples to answer the research questions.

Remixing linguacultural messages through memes: for both consumers and producers

L2 learners read and created remixed linguacultural knowledge through memes. Meaning-making was empowered by enriching the information in the message through multiple modes, adding emotions and feelings through semiotic resources, and making new meanings through creative remixing.

The multimodal nature of memes helps enrich the information conveyed during communication. Visuals that accompany or match the texts can aid in comprehension and linguacultural knowledge learning. This benefit was explicitly mentioned by 2 participants (Brent and Vicky). For example, Brent managed to learn a Chinese internet slang "穷到褪色" ("one is so poor that he/she fades," meaning one is poor and sad) with the help of a meme (Figure 2). As we can see from the meme (see Figure 2), the text "穷到褪色" is accompanied by the visual, which presents a sad frog literally color-fading and crying. Besides the text-visual matching, Brent also pointed out that the "extra little touch of emotion" in this meme when used in context helped him understand the slang better in the conversation. It is worth mentioning that Brent did not actively participate in the conversation around this meme. He was a consumer while still finding opportunities to learn some languages on his own from reading memes. This was pointed out in the interview as "it helped me to learn some things, learn

some languages otherwise I would not have learned."

Another meme (Figure 3), pointed out by Brent, featuring a little figure saying "谢谢老板" ("thank you, boss") with "hongbao" in hands (Chinese red packet containing money inside as a gift) served as a reinforcement of cultural knowledge. As Brent said, "it's funnier if you know it, the 'hongbao' thing." He also pointed out limitations of learning from reading memes with a lack of instruction. According to Brent, learners need to have some if not a lot of linguacultural knowledge learned before using memes as a learning resource. In addition, learners need to be highly motivated because he thinks that "it's about effort." Learners will have to be willing to devote time to doing their own research when they encounter a meme that they do not understand in the chat group; otherwise, as he mentioned, "I don't think they will go on any kind of search engine to find out what that figure was."

A learning community in which these intercultural young people shared inquiries and knowledge was vital in scaffolding meme reading and learning. Figure 4 & 5 present an example on how memes helped Vicky learn current Chinese slang—六六六(666). The meme combined 666 and hand gesture (the little guy doing gesture for 6 in Chinese) together. When this meme was first shared by a Chinese native speaker in the chat group, Vicky said she did not understand it because both the text and gesture were culturally specific to Chinese. It was Freddy who explicitly asked "does 666 mean demons? It seems like 666 has different meanings in Chinese and English" in the chat group. It then brought up conversations about 666 in Chinese pop culture and in English among Chinese native speakers and L2 learners. It was through the conversation that she managed to grasp the meaning of the current slang, even if she did not participate in the conversation herself. She mentioned in the interview, "I sometimes don't understand, but oftentimes other Americans also don't understand and will ask questions for the Chinese in the chat to answer. It's a very non-threatening environment." After learning that 六六六 (666) means cool and good job in Chinese pop culture, Vicky once used it herself in the chat group saying she did a 六六六(666) job for her final project. It was well received by the group members. Vicky demonstrated how she learned linguacultural knowledge from a meme and properly used it in a new context with real life interlocutors. This is not to say memes assure linguacultural knowledge learning. From this case, it was the follow-up conversation, scaffolding from intercultural peers and non-threatening environment that co-played an important part in learning.

Memes not only gave them opportunities to read/consume but also gave them a creative way of producing/remixing. Two participants (Brent and Vicky) actively took on authorship in this multimodal codemeshing (Pacheco & Smith, 2015) genre, in which they multimodally remixed linguacultural messages with communicative needs. For example, Figure 6 was created by Brent and sent out on the "Mooncake Day" (Mid-autumn Festival). The meme was adapted from the movie *The Great Gatsby*. The original line in the movie scene was "Congratulations, old sport," which he changed into "Happy Mooncake Day, old sport." Brent also changed the original glass of wine into a mooncake to make cultural reference to Chinese Mid-autumn Festival. Brent revealed a high symbolic competence (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) through language play to achieve his communicative needs in this specific context. His meme was read and appreciated by group members, followed by more festive greetings and conversations. For Brent, as he explained in the interview, his message was conveyed in an amusing way in which he mixed cultures to share festive greetings to both Chinese native speakers and learners in the chat group. Memeing was found to help Brent, an active L2 user and producer, gain agency in the chat group's intercultural communication and exercise his linguacultural knowledge in a creative and enjoyable way with a real-life audience.

L2 learners made linguacultural learning out of memes in different ways. Learning was supported as memes may provide learners with opportunities to observe current slang in use in certain contexts with scaffolding visuals. The importance of conversations around the memes and scaffolding from peers in
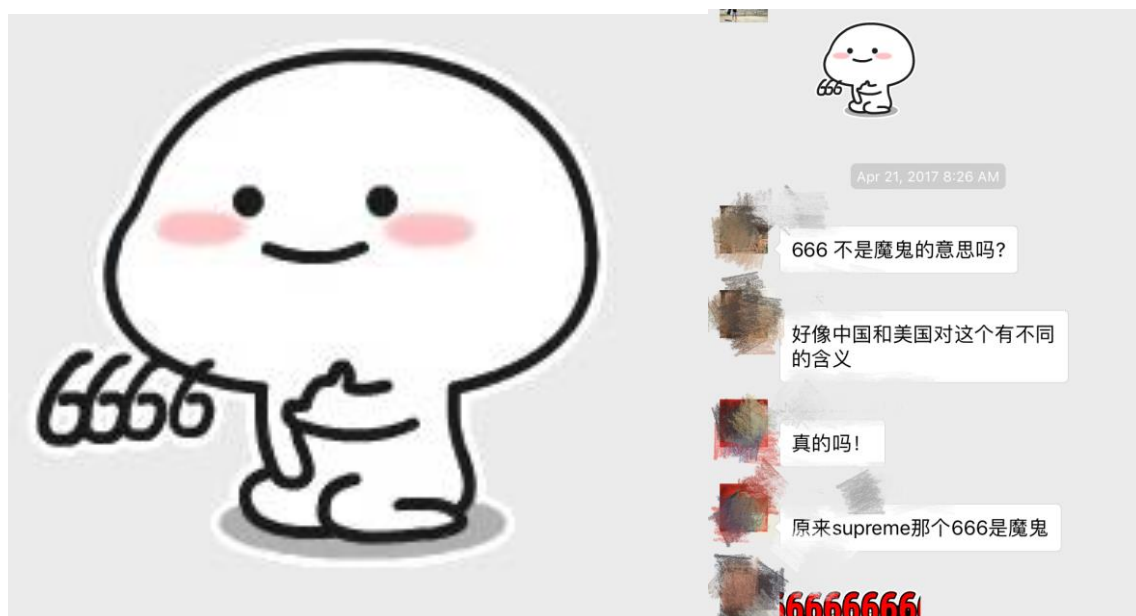
the chat group was highlighted in knowledge construction. Memes also served as an enjoyable way to exercise linguacultural knowledge during communication with intercultural peers in organic contexts.
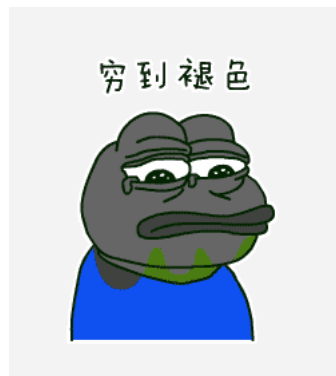
Figure 2 *The "穷到褪色" meme (one is so poor that he/she fades)*

Figure 3 *The "hongbao" meme (red packet)*

Figure 4 & 5 *The 666 meme and follow-up conversations*

Figure 6 *The mooncake meme made by Brent*

Constructing identities through memes: identity expansion and identities that they valued

In addition to seeking knowledge learning opportunities from memes, participants were also able to construct identities through memeing in the chat group. To illustrate, Freddy was found to mostly use Chinese specific memes (Chinese text and visual with reference to Chinese culture) in the chat group. For instance, Figure 7 was a meme shared by Freddy when the group was chatting about finals. The meme pokes fun of and makes reference to illustration styles during the Mao period in China, with the text reading 'Studying makes me so happy'. Freddy called them the "mao-style memes" in the interview. He explained that he saved and used these memes because his Chinese friends used them a lot. Viewing using these "mao-style" memes as a way to be "endearing to native speakers", Freddy further connected his use with identity construction by saying "it sort of indicates you are part of Chinese culture, and that you are someone that can be engaged with like a Chinese person." The use of native-like Chinese memes acted as a marker of belonging within Chinese-speaking communities for him. This is consistent with his identity evolution caused by life transitions. As he became a "洋女婿" (foreign son-in-law in a Chinese family), he made an effort to invest in this new identity through semiotic resources during communication.

**Figure 7** *The Chinese 'mao-style' meme shared by Freddy*

Brent also acknowledged that using Chinese memes made him feel "more of part of the community." Additionally, when reflecting on his meme use in the community, he noticed that the memes he saved, recycled or created were aligned with his sense of humor. For example, Figure 8 was a meme sent by him in the chat when the group was joking about losing the board game. The meme consists of a

grumpy cat face and a Chinese text saying "son, daddy so disappointed." Brent mentioned in the interview that his sense of humor was "a little bit sarcastic" and he liked collecting memes that were similar to his humorous personality within and outside of the chat group. Memeing in the chat group exposed him to more memes in use and offered him more opportunities to participate in producing, thus, he gained access to more semiotic resources to explore and expand his self-representations.

Figure 8 *The humorous cat meme shared by Brent*

Vicky considered herself to be a big fan of "Chinglish" memes. She liked sharing them in the chat group because she thought they reflected "the bridge in language and culture that the group represents." Figure 9 was a meme she shared in the group. The meme uses 2 different languages and pop culture symbol to create meaning. "我的" sounds like "water" and means "my" in Chinese. "Squirtle is Water type" and the hashtag "pokemonpickuplines" originate from the *Pokémon* in the popular culture. She explained that only people with an understanding of both languages and pop culture would be able to get the humor. She strongly identified with the intercultural group that differs from monolingual Chinese- or English-speaking communities through her memeing practice.
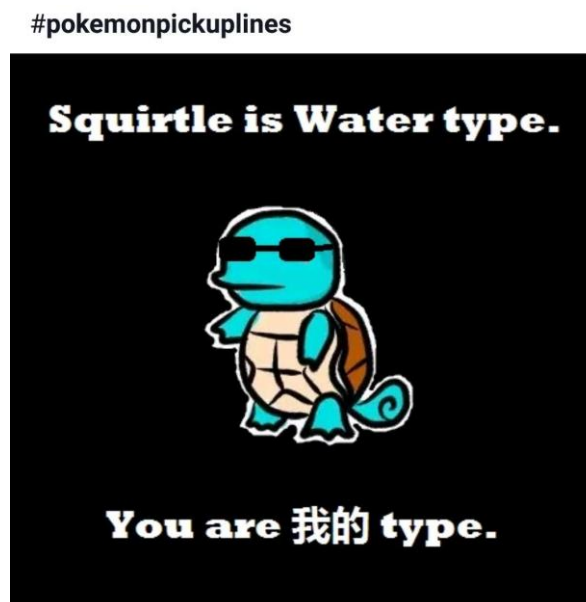
Figure 9 *The 'Chinglish' meme shared by Vicky*

For Vicky, she described an emerging bicultural identity and mindset that she had developed in the chat group:

> *I think I'm open to see things in a new way, sometimes it's not that I necessarily can "embrace*

them" for myself. I guess identity does drive me to learn, I want to know what Chinese people and friends think and feel, what makes them who they are, and then reflect on how what I think and feel and do makes me who I am as an American. Of course I think our similarities as people unite us in ways beyond what our differences can make us, but I think learning about cultural differences can be a fun way to be distinct from each other and even contrastingly to come together and share and appreciate these differences. (Vicky, interview, 2018)

Memeing offered a broader repertoire for L2 learners to explore and construct identities. In this process, new identities might become available and empowered. Obviously, memeing is not the only way to construct identities, however, as a multimodal, creative, and light-hearted way of communication, it may enrich meaning-making by offering an enjoyable and expanded way to negotiate a sense of self.

These participants demonstrated agency in expressing their valued identities through memeing in the intercultural chat group. Their motivation to learn was enhanced as they invested in identity construction. Therefore, a commitment in L2 linguacultural learning was powerfully recruited when they became more motivated and agentive language learners and users.

Developing social connections through memes: more meaningful connections and conversations

Memeing was found to be a social practice through which learners build social connections and potentially friendships. Freddy, Brent, and Vicky explicitly mentioned that memeing helped them make friends in the chat group. For Freddy, memeing served as an endearing way to "engage cross-culturally" and to "facilitate interactions and potentially friendship." For Brent, the fun and the emotion brought by memes served as "an important part of mobile relationships." For Vicky, memeing offered a reason to "laugh at each other and to share moments of friendship in non-academic moments." The light-hearted nature of memes contributed to creating a friendly collaborative learning environment. From the memeing practices, memes were mostly used to express gratitude (Figure 3), send greetings (Figure 6), give compliment (Figure 4) and share humor (Figure 7, 8, 9). These pragmatic functions enriched by semiotic resources helped build rapport and friendship in this intercultural chat group so that learning happened in an organic and non-threatening space.

Outside of this specific chat group, memeing was also used by L2 learners to engage native speakers and other learning communities. For example, Vicky mentioned that she constantly shared memes with her friends who are learning Chinese or Chinese friends who know English. She thought that memes were a good way to start a conversation to practice Chinese naturally and to talk about cultural differences.

A similar view is also expressed by Freddy:

I view memes as a window into learning about another culture. They can be the stimulus for encouraging more fruitful interactions with Chinese speakers… It can open up avenues to use Chinese and meet people and it would open up learners to new communities of practice, which affords all sorts of possibilities for language learning and friendship development. (Freddy, interview, 2018)

Both Vicky and Freddy show us how mindful L2 learners perceive memes and how learning beyond classrooms can be empowered by memes. First, memeing can open up potentially meaningful conversations on various topics in which L2 learners may be able to either practice language in use or discuss cultural issues. Second, memeing might motivate L2 learners to seek more spaces to explore, practice, remix, and communicate, where they could find more social connections and supports.

Whether inside or outside of the chat group, meaning-making is supported when we view memes as conversation openers. More negotiations of meaning will take place and contribute to collective knowledge making that embraces mixing languages and cultures. In terms of linguacultural learning, potentially significant social supports facilitated by memes, not only in this specific community, but also from more *affinity spaces* (Gee, 2004), will open ways forward for L2 learners.

Discussion
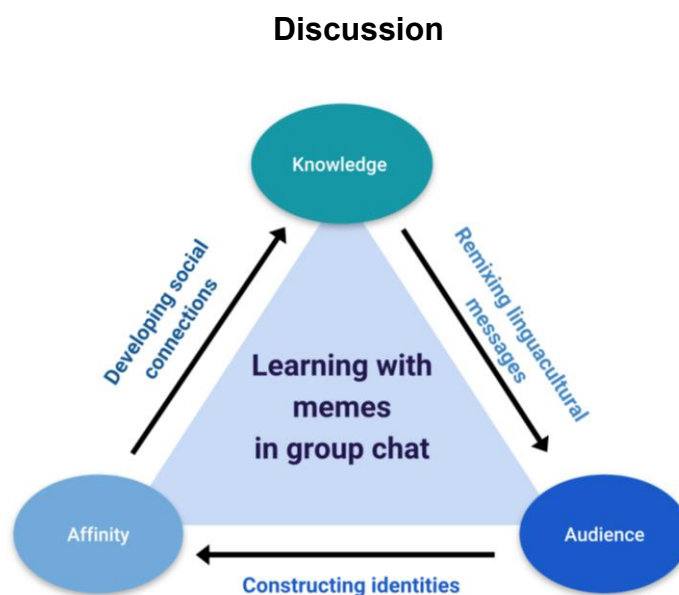
Figure 10 *How meaning-making and learning are empowered by memes for mindful L2 learners (Freddy, Vicky, & Brent)*

This study has explored two research questions: (1) How do memes support meaning-making interculturally? and (2) How does memeing contribute to linguacultural learning of L2 learners? Based on the findings, a three-phrase, cyclical model (Figure 10) that emerged from 3 of the participants who engaged in memeing is presented to answer the questions. It should be noted that not every participant experienced the exact same learning journey. Rather, these data represent general trends among 3 mindful and agentive L2 learners that were varied somewhat by individual learning experiences.

*Remixing linguacultural messages***:** The group chat provides an organic learning space for learners and memes—a multimodal creative genre, making remixing languages and cultures possible. In this stage, meaning-making is enriched by multiple semiotic modes. Learning is supported when learners use memes as resources to learn language and culture with the help of peers and as a way to exercise their existing linguacultural knowledge with a real audience beyond classroom walls.

*Constructing identities***:** Through communication, learners read and construct identities. Memeing, as one of the ways to connect with others, empowers meaning-making by broadening the semiotic repertoire to explore and negotiate identities they value. Those valued identities that are well-received in the group then motivate learners to recruit agency and investment in learning. A sense of affinity and a community of learning emerge to empower language and culture learning.

*Developing social connections***:** Through negotiation of meanings and identities, learners build a sense of affinity in the learning community where they feel more comfortable to engage interculturally. Memes can serve as conversation triggers that afford possibilities for collective linguacultural meaning and knowledge making. In this stage, learners may desire to find more spaces to articulate their valued

identities. Memeing, as an endearing way of connecting, can help learners gain potentially meaningful social supports that benefit their learning trajectories or even enrich experiences in their personal lives. Ultimately, these intercultural interactions and experiences will contribute to their linguacultural knowledge, which enables more creating, remixing, and communicating.

Memes as multimodal pragmatic device: communication, identities, and agency

The memeing practices that L2 learners engaged in reflect and expand communicative needs in rich contexts mediated by technology. Serving as new pragmatic devices, their multimodal nature allows semiotic modes to enrich the information and emphasize the emotion when they perform pragmatic functions. By mixing and remixing cultural messages into these pragmatic devices, learners might be able to raise awareness of both linguistic and cultural knowledge when they observe and participate in meaning-making. Through observation and participation, learners may pay more attention to how memes are responded to, thus, becoming more aware of pragmatic rules across cultures.

This way of communication not only facilitates the exchange of messages, but also creates enriched contexts that welcomes inquiry and creativity. When learners read, question, remix, create, and share memes, they are organizing and negotiating identities and relations to the social world. During this process, empowered by a broader semiotic repertoire and audience, learners might discover and take on new identities that they value. These new identities will motivate learners to heavily invest in language learning when they view their L2 as an integral part of who they are (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Such motivation will empower them to become autonomous learners, and more importantly, transform them from language learners to agentive language users.

Memes as window to social support and meaningful intercultural conversations

Memes are not an end in themselves. Through use of languages and visuals embedded with cultural context, we can get a glimpse into how different communities perceive different things related to different aspects of life. When they are used within specific contexts, they inform how different people view the world. Acting as a window to more, memeing can empower L2 learners to enact membership in various communities and affinity spaces to gain social support for learning.

Memes can also be used by L2 learners to engage native speakers on various topics. Therefore, it opens up more opportunities for negotiation of meanings, through which learners can not only exercise language but also develop a mindset that embraces multiple cultures and languages. These potentially fruitful interactions and conversations afford meaningful learning experiences and/or relationships in real life. For example, a shift in cultural mindset or a long-lasting intercultural friendship might start from a meme.

Language learning might start from classrooms, but it eventually ends in the real world where we use language to interact with people and discover ourselves. Therefore, learning a language should be connected to applications outside of classrooms, rather than simply scores on a transcript. Linking this perspective with potentially meaningful language experiences to personal lives catalyzed by memes, both L2 learners and educators should be encouraged to see how such a naturally-engaging meaning-making device can empower language learning and serve L2 learners as authentic social members.

Conclusion

This study contributes an understanding of how memes empower meaning-making and language learning in an intercultural chat group. Using naturally-occurring meaning-making practices as data

sources, it was impossible to control and investigate specific variables. However, the naturalistic nature of the data better captured the meaning-making that L2 learners actually engaged in in real life. The current study was not designed to generalize the only way in which memes can assist language learning. Rather, it offers initial insights that memes may extend the possibilities for how L2 learners construct knowledge, articulate identities, and develop social connections. These possibilities work to motivate learning and empower learners as social members and human beings.

Meme-related activities in L2 classrooms can be guided by *bridging activities* (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), which consist of 3 steps— "observation and collection, guided exploration and analysis, and creation and participation" (p. 566). Students should be encouraged to find the memes that interest them, bring them to the classroom where learners collaboratively explore and analyze memes with guidance. After learners develop their own sense of selected memes, educators can encourage them to use memes to engage people outside of the classroom in real life scenarios. Students should be asked to pay attention to how their use of memes is responded to, what impact it has on the conversation and how actions are situated where they use certain memes through natural engagements. Additionally, students can be made aware that these memes can serve as good conversation starters that may lead to potentially fruitful intercultural conversations and friendship development.

Copyright issues are important factors to consider when students manipulate, remix, and circulate images and videos. Fortunately, students and educators may be able to incorporate others' intellectual property into their academic work under the doctrine of "fair use" (Schoen & Blazer, 2019). Although most memes are probably covered by the fair use doctrine, educators and students can avoid copyright infringement by linking to legitimate sources if they want to make their meme creations publicly accessible. Furthermore, educators and students are encouraged to use resources under a public license (e.g., Creative Commons).

This study was limited to one specific intercultural group as the empirical site of research. Future research could broaden the investigative scope to consider tracking L2 learners' memeing practices across multiple platforms and over a longer period of time to gain a holistic and deeper understanding of how space, time, and life stages may be intertwined with memeing and language learning. Research can also adopt a different lens to explore the humorous nature of memes. The affordances of memes in language learning await future research as language educators work to make learning more enjoyable, engaging, and effective.

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Biodata

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Acknowledgements

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Part 1: General questions (learning background, learning style, learning motivation, goals)

1. Tell me about your Chinese learning background.
   - How long have you been learning Chinese?
   - Where do you learn Chinese?
   - Why did you start learning Chinese?

2. How do you learn Chinese, generally speaking?
   - For example, do you only learn it in the classroom or other ways?
   - How well do you think you speak Chinese?

3. Now I'm going to ask you some questions about the Third Space cultural corner group:
   - When did you join the group?
   - Why did you join the group?
   - How often do you chat in the group?

- How do you like chatting in the group chat?

Part 2: Use of Memes

1. Do you share or create memes in the Third Space chat group? If yes, I would like you to answer the following questions:

2. If you have shared memes in the chat group, where do you get the memes? Could you let me know all the sources you've used?

3. What do you look for when sharing a meme?

4. Have you ever created your own memes?
   - If yes, could you show me a meme that you have created?
   - What is this meme about?
   - Why did you create this meme?
   - What steps do you take?
   - Tell me more about your thinking behind your meme (purpose, goals, etc.).

5. Do you use memes in Chinese more or memes in English more in the group chat? Why?

6. How do you react usually when others post a meme in the group chat?
   - What will you do if others post a meme that you feel difficult to understand? Did it ever happen to you?
   - Could you tell me more about that? For example, were there specific things you did to understand the meme?

7. Is there anything more you want to say about your experience with memeing?

Part 3: Examples

1. I found this meme that you have used in the group chat very interesting. Could you explain more about it?
   - What is this meme about?
   - For what purpose did you use it in this situation? Could you walk me through your thinking on the use?
   - Could you tell me your understanding of the text?
   - Could you tell me your understanding of the image?

2. Could you show me 2 more memes you have used in the group chat? Could you walk me through your thinking on the use again?
   - For example, what is this meme about?
   - Where did you get the meme?
   - Why did you use it here?

Part 4: Learning with memes

1. Do you think the participation of memeing has impacted your learning and understanding of Chinese language and culture? Why or why not?

- In what ways and to what extent do you think memes are, or aren't appropriate for helping you with Chinese language and culture learning?

2. If memes have helped you in learning, what have you learned from memeing?
   - Have you learned some new words from memes?
   - Have you learned cultural information because of memes?

3. Are you seeing any values in memes for learning?
   - If so, do you think it would be helpful to use them in the classroom? Why or why not?
   - In what ways do you think memes be used in classroom?
   - If not, why do you think they are useless?

4. Is there anything else about learning you'd like to share with me?

Part 5: Attitudes

1. What has been the most important part about knowing/sharing/creating memes in the chat group for you?

2. Did your experience with memes in the chat group make you think in a different way? If yes,
   - Have you become more aware of the cultural difference in this intercultural group?
   - Have you experienced such "aha" moment? If so, could you say more about that?

Appendix B: Initial codes—a combination of inductive coding and deductive mapping

Initial Codes	In Dimension 1: Multimodal	Explanation	In Dimension 2: Social	Explanation
• memes to learn current slang	memes to learn current slang	Images and text graphics aided in reading memes and learning slang.	memes to learn current slang	The conversation around memes and the scaffolding from peers played an important role in learning language.
• memes to raise sociocultural awareness	memes to raise sociocultural awareness	Some images had culture-specific references that raised their awareness on specific cultural practices / products / perspectives.	memes to raise sociocultural awareness	Some memes triggered fruitful conversations around current socio-cultural issues.
• memes to remix languages and cultures	memes to remix languages and cultures	Memes offered more symbolic choices to blend in bilingual/bicultural knowledge.	memes to remix languages and cultures	The intercultural nature of the group welcomed "Chinglish" memeing.
• memes to construct identities	memes to construct identities	They remixed different symbolic resources to represent themselves (e.g., selfie, translanguaging practice).	memes to construct identities	Learners strongly identified with the intercultural group that differed from monolingual Chinese- or English-speaking communities through memeing practice
• memes to express feelings	memes to express feelings	Semiotic resources helped convey emotions and feelings.	memes to connect in the community	Memeing created a friendly learning community where they shared inquiries and knowledge.
• memes to connect in the community	memes to be fun and playful	It was a creative and playful way to make meaning through multimodal codemeshing.	memes to build friendship	Memeing served as an endearing way to facilitate interactions interculturally and potentially friendship.
• memes to be fun and playful				
• memes to build friendship				