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Flouting Gricean Maxims for a Laugh: Conversational Implicature and Multimodal Humor Construction in Indonesian Internet Memes

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Abstract

This research examines conversational implicature as the mechanism that generates humor in Indonesian internet memes, building on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and its later development by Levinson (1983) and Yule (1996). A meme is treated here not as a static picture-and-caption object but as a compressed communicative event, in which a sender addresses an unseen audience that must reason past the literal surface of an image or caption to recover what is actually intended. Seven Indonesian memes circulating between January- July 2026 were purposively selected and analyzed through Grice's maxims in combination with Attardo and Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor. Three patterns emerged. Flouting of the maxim of Quality was the most frequent, generally achieved through irony or through the inversion of a familiar proverb or piece of self-help wisdom, and it tended to recast an institutional or personal grievance as a joke. Flouting of the maxim of Relation was rarer but produced sharper comic incongruity, since the humor turned on a single expression carrying two unrelated referents at once; closer inspection suggests this device is better described as an ambiguity rooted in the maxim of Manner that only surfaces as an apparent breach of Relation. A third pattern, termed multimodal flouting in this study, involved memes whose flouted claim was never composed as a caption at all but was already present in a photograph, a sign, or a mural — in one case apparently completed by the audience rather than intended by whoever made the image. This last pattern suggests that Grice's originally speaker-centered account needs to be extended, in digital settings, to cover implicature that is inferred collectively rather than encoded deliberately, and that recovering any of these implicatures depends more on shared Indonesian cultural knowledge than on pragmatic competence of a general or universal kind.

Keywords: Conversational Implicature, Gricean Maxims, Verbal Humor, Multimodal Pragmatics, Indonesian Internet Memes

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I INTRODUCTION

A meme that says exactly what it means has, by the unwritten standards of the genre, failed as a meme. Take a caption such as “Saya sedang berbahagia” (“I am currently happy”) placed over a photograph of someone in tears beside a stack of unpaid bills. Nothing in the sentence is ungrammatical, and nothing in it is false in any way that could be checked directly against the world; and yet no one fluent in Indonesian meme culture reads it as a sincere report of the poster’s mood. The humor lives entirely in the space between what the caption asserts and what the image shows, and in the reader’s willingness to close that space by assuming something closer to the opposite of the literal claim. This gap is not an incidental quirk of meme culture. It is, on reflection, close to the entire mechanism that allows a meme to work as humor rather than as a plain photograph with a caption attached to it.

Pragmatics has a well-established name for this gap: conversational implicature. Grice (1975) proposed that a speaker who appears to violate a conversational norm, while still being understood as fundamentally cooperative, invites the hearer to infer an additional, unstated meaning.

Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle assumes that participants in a conversation are, by default, attempting to communicate efficiently and truthfully. He divided this general assumption into four maxims: Quality (say what you believe to be true and have evidence for), Quantity (make your contribution as informative as required, no more and no less), Relation (be

relevant), and Manner (be clear, brief, and orderly). Humor is not generated by the maxims themselves but by what happens when a speaker appears to break one while remaining, at some deeper level, cooperative. A hearer who continues to assume cooperation does not conclude that the speaker has simply failed; instead, the hearer searches for an implicated meaning that restores coherence to the exchange.

Levinson (1983) later distinguished generalized from particularized implicature, with the latter depending heavily on context rather than on any fixed linguistic form. Meme humor sits almost entirely in the particularized category, since recovering it typically requires knowledge specific to a place, a time, or a cultural reference rather than knowledge of language alone. Yule (1996) reframed the same maxims in more accessible terms while preserving Grice’s central claim: implicature is calculated by the hearer, not simply decoded from the words used. This claim becomes important later in this study, since it explains why a meme that is transparently funny to one audience can read as a plain non sequitur to another.

Grice’s own examples were drawn from spoken, turn-by-turn conversation between two known interlocutors. Internet memes complicate that picture in at least two ways: the sender is addressing an anonymous mass audience rather

than a single hearer, and the entire exchange is compressed into one static frame combining image and text. How Grice's inferential mechanism survives that compression, and what it does to the resulting humor, is the specific problem this study investigates.

Where Grice's explains how an additional meaning gets generated, humor theory is needed to explain why that additional meaning is experienced as funny rather than merely as a correction. Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor proposes that a text becomes humorous when it activates two distinct and partly opposed scripts at once, with the punchline forcing a sudden switch from the script the reader expected to the one that was hidden underneath it. Attardo and Raskin (1991) developed this into the General Theory of Verbal Humor, adding parameters such as target and narrative strategy on top of the original mechanism of script opposition.

Attardo (1994) drew a direct line between script opposition and Grice, arguing that jokes routinely operate by flouting one or more conversational maxims, and that the incongruity a hearer notices is pragmatic in origin before it is semantic. Dynel (2009) pushed this further by studying how flouted maxims specifically, rather than script opposition as a general category, generate humor in naturally occurring talk. She used the term non-bona-fide communication for exchanges that both parties understand are not meant literally — which is exactly the shared understanding that lets a flouted maxim register as a joke rather than as a communicative failure.

Sperber and Wilson (1995) offer a complementary account through Relevance Theory: humor can arise precisely when a hearer spends interpretive effort chasing relevance and is rewarded with a reading that turns out to be relevant in a way not anticipated at the outset.

Indonesian pragmatics has its own tradition of studying humor that predates the meme era by some distance. Wijana (1995) treated Indonesian cartoons as a site of deliberate language play, arguing that a large share of Indonesian humor exploits ambiguity at the lexical level, frequently through homophony or double meaning specific to Indonesian or to regional languages. Rahardi (2005) examined politeness and implicature in Indonesian directives and found a broad preference among Indonesian speakers for managing disagreement or complaint indirectly rather than head-on — a preference that aligns with Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, in which speakers are expected to minimize the expression of face-threatening intent even when the underlying message is unmistakable. That preference turns out to matter directly for internet memes, since a considerable share of Indonesian meme humor functions as an indirect, face-saving complaint about work, romance, or economic hardship, delivered under the cover of a joke.

Three considerations make the Indonesian context a productive site for this kind of investigation. First, memes are produced in very high volume across platforms such as X, Instagram, and TikTok, so the available data keeps renewing itself rather than sitting still. Second, Indonesian digital humor leans heavily on code-switching, regional slang, and shared national reference points, which means implicature in this setting is rarely a matter of grammar alone; it depends on cultural knowledge the sender simply assumes the audience already possesses. Third, while conversational implicature and verbal humor have each received substantial theoretical attention on their own, and while Indonesian pragmatics has its own tradition of studying humor in cartoons and stand-up comedy (Wijana, 1995), comparatively little published work applies a Gricean

framework specifically to Indonesian internet memes, and almost none extends that framework to memes whose humor depends on the relationship between an image and text already embedded in it rather than on a caption composed for the occasion.

Three research questions follow from this gap, and they are best kept distinct rather than folded into one broad question. First, which Gricean maxims are most frequently flouted in Indonesian internet memes, and through what specific linguistic or visual strategies? Second, how does the interaction between image and text shape the way a flouted maxim is recovered by the reader? Third, what does the resulting pattern suggest about the role of shared cultural knowledge in meme humor, set against the two-party, face-to-face model Grice originally

described? Correspondingly, this study aims to identify the maxims flouted across a set of Indonesian internet memes, to describe the inferential process by which readers recover humor from each flout, and to consider what happens to Grice's speaker-centered model once the flouted claim was never authored as a joke in the first place.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The present section has already situated conversational implicature and verbal humor theory within the specific case of Indonesian memes. Section 2 explains the data and the analytical procedure used to examine them. Section 3 presents the findings, organized by which maxim is flouted, and discusses the patterns that emerge across the seven data. Section 4 concludes by returning to the research questions and considering the study's limitations.

II RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design, which aims to describe the characteristics of naturally occurring data systematically and accurately rather than to quantify them statistically. Following Sudaryanto (1993), the data are distinguished into two sources: substantial data, consisting of the captions, embedded text, and accompanying images suspected of carrying conversational implicature through maxim flouting, and locational data, referring to the platforms on which these texts circulated, namely X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and image-sharing groups on WhatsApp.

Seven memes, collected between January-July 2026, were selected purposively rather than randomly. A meme was included only if it combined visual material with a propositional claim, whether in the form of a caption composed by the meme-maker or text already embedded in the image itself, and only if it circulated widely enough to appear on more than one account, indicating that its intended reading was shared rather than idiosyncratic. Memes relying primarily on visual slapstick with no propositional claim to flout, or on wordplay that

resists translation into a pragmatic frame, were excluded, since the aim of this study is to trace how maxim-flouting produces humor rather than to catalogue every mechanism of meme comedy.

Data collection followed a non-participant observation technique: memes were identified through ordinary browsing of public posts, without the researchers interacting with the original posters, and saved together with their most common reading as reflected in public comment threads. Data analysis used the referential matching method (*metode padan referensial*) proposed by Sudaryanto (1993), in which a linguistic form is matched against the extralinguistic referent it points to in order to establish what is literally asserted. This procedure was combined with a maxim-flouting coding scheme adapted from Attardo (1994): each datum was first transcribed and translated, then checked for which Gricean maxim, if any, the literal claim appeared to violate, and finally interpreted for the implicature a cooperative reader would be expected to recover. Where a datum's flouted claim was not authored as a caption but was already present in the image, as in three of the seven cases discussed in Section

4.3, the same matching procedure was applied to the relationship between the embedded claim and the photographic evidence surrounding it, rather than to a caption-image relationship. Coding was checked informally against the interpretation most commonly attached to each meme in its public comment threads, on the assumption that convergent readings among many independent commenters are reasonable evidence that the

same implicature was being recovered by the wider audience.

Because the dataset is limited to seven purposively selected memes, the findings below should be read as an illustrative qualitative account of how maxim-flouting operates in this genre rather than as a statistically representative distribution across Indonesian meme culture as a who

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Flouting the Maxim of Quality: Saying the Opposite of What Is Meant

Three of the seven memes in this data set flout the maxim of Quality, most often by asserting or implying something the sender patently does not believe. The first sub-pattern exploits an existing text that already carries cultural authority, then quietly rewrites its ending.

Datum 1



Figure 1. A reworked pantun attributed to the comedian Sule.

One meme attributes to the comedian Sule a version of the well-known Indonesian pantun “Berakit-rakit ke hulu, berenang-renang ke tepian, bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian” (row upstream first, swim to shore later; suffer first, enjoy the reward later) — except that the final line has been replaced with “ke Puskesmas kemudian,” suffer first, then go to the community health clinic. The caption borrows the rhythmic and syntactic shell of a text the reader already accepts as folk wisdom, and that borrowing is precisely what makes the substitution work: the parallel structure primes the reader to expect a reward, delivers a clinic visit instead, and forces a reconstruction of the

intended meaning as a wry comment on how effort in ordinary Indonesian life is more likely to end in exhaustion or minor injury than in the promised payoff. The word sakit (sick, in pain) already sits inside the proverb’s third line, so the punchline is not an arbitrary substitution grafted onto an unrelated source; it is primed by the source text itself. In Attardo and Raskin’s (1991) terms, this is a clean case of script opposition, with an “inherited wisdom” script colliding with a “health complaint” script that the proverb’s own wording has already half-prepared the reader to expect.

Datum 2 and Datum 3



Figure 2. “Make more problems



Figure 3. “try new mistakes”

Two further memes flout Quality by pushing a piece of popular self-help advice to its logical opposite. Datum 2 superimposes the line “Jika masalah membuatmu belajar, maka sering-seringlah membuat masalah” (“if problems make you learn, then keep making problems often”) over a still image of a well-known television lawyer character recognized for being untrustworthy. Datum 3 superimposes “jangan mengulangi kesalahan yang sama, masih banyak kesalahan-kesalahan lain yang perlu dicoba” (“don’t repeat the same mistake — there are still plenty of other mistakes worth trying”) over a photograph of a bodybuilder flexing beside the darkened silhouette of an infant. In both cases the sender takes a piece of conventional wisdom — learn from your mistakes, do not repeat them — and pushes its internal logic one step past anything a sincere speaker would actually endorse, arriving at an absurd imperative to go out and seek new mistakes. Because no cooperative speaker could seriously mean that conclusion, the reader discards the literal reading and recovers an implicature that reads as self-mocking rather than instructional.

The choice of framing device in each case is not incidental, and it is worth pausing on why. In Datum 2, an untrustworthy fictional lawyer serves as the mouthpiece for the advice, and that casting primes the audience toward a non-literal reading even before the absurdity of the claim itself does — which is consistent with Dynel’s (2009) point that speakers can signal non-bona-fide communication through framing devices external to the words being used. In Datum 3, the visual reference to an infant activates a considerably more personal script than the lawyer does in Datum 2, steering readers toward a joke about repeated romantic or personal mistakes rather than a general life lesson. Read together, the two data suggest that the same flouted maxim can be tuned toward quite different implicatures depending on which image accompanies it, which is a point the coding scheme in Section 2 was designed to capture rather than average away.

Across all three data in this category, the flout is used less often to mock a named individual — the classic target structure described by Attardo and Raskin (1991) — than to voice a shared grievance about institutions, or about one’s own recurring mistakes. The implicature is doing two

jobs at once here: it produces humor, and it performs the face-saving work that Rahardi (2005) associates with Indonesian indirectness and that Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle would predict for a speaker who wants to register a complaint without stating it as one. The joke, in other words, is also a socially acceptable way of complaining.

2. Flouting the Maxim of Relation: The Sharpest Incongruity

Datum 4



Figure 4. “Nama baik” in two unrelated senses. Only one meme in the dataset was initially coded as a flout of the maxim of Relation, and it produced the strongest reported engagement of any datum discussed here, judged informally by comment volume relative to comparable posts from the same account. The meme shows a boy in a bucket hat pressing a finger to his lips, captioned “gapapa namamu jelek dimata orang, yang penting namamu masih baik dimata BRI, MANDIRI, BNI, BCA” (it’s fine if your name looks bad in other people’s eyes, what matters is that your name still looks good to BRI, Mandiri, BNI, and BCA — four of Indonesia’s largest banks). The first clause sets up a “nama baik” (good name) script that any Indonesian reader initially processes as a statement about social reputation or moral character. The second clause reuses the exact same phrase but relocates it to an entirely different domain — a bank’s internal record of whether a customer has defaulted on credit — without any explicit signal that the topic has shifted.

On the coding scheme applied in this study, this datum is worth treating more carefully than the label “Relation flout” alone suggests. What actually goes wrong, on a strict reading of

Grice's (1975) four maxims, is not that the second clause is irrelevant to the first — a hearer has no reason yet to think it is, since the surface form carries over cleanly. What goes wrong is that the phrase “nama baik” is ambiguous between two senses that the speaker does not disambiguate, which is a textbook case of what the maxim of Manner explicitly warns against: avoid ambiguity. The apparent breach of Relation is therefore a downstream effect rather than the primary mechanism — it only becomes visible once the reader notices, mid-sentence, that continuing to track the first sense of “nama baik” produces a claim about banks that makes no sense as a statement of reputation, and so the two clauses feel unrelated. Recasting the flout this way brings the analysis closer to Attardo and Raskin's (1991) script-opposition model than the original Relation-only reading did: the joke works by holding two scripts together under one lexical form and letting the reader discover, mid-sentence, that the two scripts do not, after all, belong to the same conversation. Because the reader has to do more inferential work here than in the Quality-flout examples discussed above — first resolving the ambiguity, then re-evaluating relevance in light of that resolution — the humor plausibly rewards that extra effort more directly than a single-step flout would, which is consistent with Sperber and Wilson's (1995) account of relevance-driven humor.

3. Multimodal Flouting: When Image and Claim Diverge

The remaining three memes complicate Grice's speaker-centered model in a way the two preceding sections do not fully anticipate, because in each case the flouted claim was not composed as a caption for the occasion. It was already present in the photograph, as signage or painted text, before anyone treated it as a joke.

Datum 5



Figure 5. "Beware of Fierce Dog."

The data above is a photograph of a house gate bearing a printed sign reading “AWAS ANJING GALAK” (Beware of Fierce Dog), illustrated with a cartoon of a snarling bulldog. The dog visible in the background of the same photograph, however, stands calmly some distance away and shows no sign of aggression. The sign asserts a proposition — this dog is fierce — that the photographic evidence sitting only a few feet away does not support: a flout of Quality staged through the gap between text and image rather than through anything a speaker says aloud. The implicature Indonesian viewers converge on is not really about the dog at all; it is a mild, shared observation about how such signs function as a generic deterrent ritual, posted regardless of the animal's actual temperament, with the humor arising from catching the household's claim in the act of overstating itself.

Datum 6

PRIA DENGAN RASA SAKITNYA



Figure 6. "A Man and His Pain."

In datum 6 follows the same logic but adds a temporal dimension. A paired photograph,

labeled "Masih Pacaran" (Still Dating) and "Saat Putus" (After the Breakup), shows a man's arm tattoo reading "nova" in the first panel and, in the second, an elaborately redone tattoo reading "Innova Reborn" — the name of a Toyota minivan — covering the same patch of skin. The heading above both panels, "PRIA DENGAN RASA SAKITNYA" (A Man and His Pain), sets up an expectation of heartbreak as the governing script, flouting Quality by promising a suffering the resolution does not really deliver: rather than dwelling in grief, the man converts a discarded name into a joke about consumer taste, aided by the near-homophony between "Nova" and "Innova." The humor depends on recognizing that the promised pain script is a decoy; what the image actually documents is resourceful indifference, and the implicature the viewer draws is closer to admiration for the workaround than to sympathy for the loss. Understanding the joke therefore requires the reader to integrate linguistic information with contextual and cultural knowledge, which supports Levinson's (1983) claim that implicature of this kind is calculated from context rather than decoded from words alone.

Datum 7



Figure 7. A devotional saying, read against its own composition.

Data above is a mural painted on the side of a delivery truck, showing a child kissing his mother's raised foot beneath the caption "Surga di telapak kaki ibu" (Heaven lies beneath a mother's feet), a well-established Islamic saying about maternal devotion. Nothing about the sentence itself is flouted; the proposition is sincere, conventional, and uncontroversial on its own terms. The incongruity instead comes from the visual composition: the foot is drawn at a height and angle that brings it directly to the child's nose rather than beneath his feet, activating a second, distinctly unintended script involving foot odor rather than filial reverence. No one who composed the mural seems to have meant to flout anything; the clash between the pious first script and the profane second script appears to have emerged from a drafting choice, and it was the online audience, not the original artist, who supplied the implicature that turned a devotional image into a widely circulated joke.

This last case is worth dwelling on because it strains Grice's model in a specific and interesting way: a flouted maxim, in the multimodal domain, does not always require an intentional sender. An unintended visual ambiguity can still be identified, reprocessed, and completed by an audience applying the same inferential mechanism Grice (1975) described for deliberate irony. Read together, Data 5 through 7 suggest that the gap between claim and evidence which drives Quality flouts in captioned memes can also arise from the more mundane gap between what an image was composed to show and what a viewer, with no stake in the original composition, notices it actually shows.

IV CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify which Gricean maxims are flouted in Indonesian internet memes, to describe how readers recover humor from each flout, and to consider what happens to Grice's speaker-centered model once the flouted claim was not authored as a joke to begin with. Across the seven memes examined, flouting of the maxim of Quality was the most frequent pattern, typically reframing an

institutional grievance or a personal shortcoming as a joke through irony or through the inversion of familiar wisdom. What was initially coded as a flout of the maxim of Relation turned out, on closer analysis, to be better described as an ambiguity rooted in the maxim of Manner that only surfaces as an apparent breach of Relation once the reader tries to reconcile two lexically identical but referentially distinct clauses — a

distinction that matters for how the humor is analyzed, even if the comic effect itself remains the sharpest of the seven data. A third pattern, termed multimodal flouting in this study, emerged from memes whose flouted claim was embedded in a photograph or mural rather than composed as a caption; one such case indicated that the implicature had been assembled by the audience rather than intended by the original author, extending Grice's model into territory it was not originally built to cover.

Taken together, these findings suggest that meme humor in the Indonesian context depends less on universal pragmatic mechanics than on a sender — or, in the multimodal cases, an audience — correctly estimating a body of shared cultural knowledge that is never stated in the text itself. This carries a practical implication for how implicature is studied going forward: models built around a single cooperative speaker addressing a single hearer may need to be supplemented, in digital settings, with an account of how implicature can be constructed collectively, after the fact, by an anonymous audience acting on a text no one designed to be funny in the first place.

This study is limited by its small, purposively selected dataset of seven memes, which supports a qualitative account of how maxim-flouting operates within this genre but does not establish a statistically representative distribution across Indonesian meme culture as a whole. The judgment that a given implicature was successfully recovered by its audience was also based on an informal reading of public comment threads rather than on controlled reception testing, and the reclassification of Datum 4 proposed in Section 3.2, while argued for on Gricean grounds, was not itself tested against reader intuitions. Future research would benefit from a larger and more systematically sampled corpus, from comparison across meme genres and platforms, and from structured audience-reception methods capable of confirming, rather than inferring, which implicature a given meme's readers actually recover — and, ideally, whether readers experience data like Datum 4 as a Relation problem, a Manner problem, or simply as a joke whose mechanics they never consciously separate.

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