

Newfriends and the Generation Gap

Seong-Young Her May 12, 2016

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Dawkins's theory of memes itself began as an inquiry into the way culture is transmitted between organisms.^[1] Later theorists in the field of cultural evolution such as Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman suggest we divide them into three forms: horizontal (i.e. between individuals within the same generation), oblique (from an older generation to a younger with less direct links than parent to offspring) and vertical (i.e. from parent to offspring).^[2] It's the whale diagram from the meme lecture.

The 'generational gap' never fails to be brought up in discussions about the Internet. In discussions about generational gaps, the use of language never fails to be brought up. In terms of Internet communities, I think that not only is there a gap between 'IRL' demographics, there is also what can be

sensibly called a generation gap in regard to different ‘generations’ of users. That is to say, ‘oldbies’ and ‘newbies’.

There is one obvious barrier to being an oldbie: you have to have been old enough early enough, to have had access to meaningful participation in the community. The World Wide Web is 25 years old; young, but old enough that many current users weren’t old enough to be online. 4chan started well over a decade ago—even “oldfags” who were literally twelve years old when they first found the site would be in their twenties by now. Imagine how much older the early adopter adults must be.

If it seems like a paradox that many of those familiar with chan culture and associated memes are well below the minimum age for being oldfags, consider Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman’s models of inter-generational cultural transmission and the notion that generations on Internet communities are separate, though correlated with, from generations IRL. It’s only natural that newfags will quickly catch up in fluency when it comes to language use online (viz. Internet memes), learning from the older generation of users.

Another correlation with the IRL demography here is that younger users of technology tend to be more creative and reckless with their use, and generally learn faster (as is the case with language in general). Now consider the flip side, too: there is evidently a correlation between being a normie and being older. Presumably this is for the reverse of the same reason being younger correlates with faster assimilation into Ironic linguacultures.

How do outsiders behave in subcultures? Why, they are effectively children to a new language, newbies, lacking in fluency. We’ve come full circle to a real paradox: on the Internet, old people are the newfags, even though you have to be old IRL to be an oldfag. Just what’s going on here?

The answer is that being a normie and being a newfag are different things: the former denotes the function of the latter and is not constrained by time spent online. It is entirely a matter of fluency whether an individual is fit to be referred to as a normie. In the case of older people who are old users, who have failed to keep up with the development of the complex linguaculture of Ironic memes, they may well be normies and oldfags simultaneously. Internet communities, especially those centred around Ironic memes, present as cultures tied to language with similar intensity ethnocultures are tied to their respective ethnic identity. They’re linguacultures. The shared experience and development of a language shape the collective identity of the community to a further accentuated degree on the Internet; it’s a

ritual of masks. The ephemerality of the Internet means its subcultures and traditions take on a quasi-oral form, with literal word bags in the form of reaction images and cospasta.

The subcultural membership signaled through ritualistic participation and the resultant homogeneity of both language and behaviour collapses into an informational, memetic genotype-phenotype synonymy. That is to say, with memes, the genotype (i.e. the memetic information behind any given instance of a meme) is also the phenotype (i.e. the given instance of a meme, such as an image). The information that spreads is the information conveyed. This genotype-phenotype synonymy is precisely the trait observed in genuine memes in the classical memetics sense: things which are mimicked. The synonymy is the consequence of homogenous minds which copy and replicate in essentially the same, or at least homologous, manner.

This apparent universality of meaning and function for Internet memes as makeshift languages breaks down when the same instance of a meme is repeated elsewhere. A pre-ironic meme reposted by an ironic meme page is immediately recognized by the audience as a sort of a sarcastic prank, intended to induce cringe. It's not merely a matter of the same trait being used for radically different functions than what it initially 'evolved for', something called 'exaptation' by evolutionary biologists like Gould or Lewontin.

The information conveyed itself changes in the new context, just as genes change in their effect depending on where they are situated in a given sequence. Hence synonymy is preserved, but only within particular contexts. The issue is inflamed when we attempt to analyze a given meme in isolation; we can't know for sure whether a meme is ironic or not without also knowing the context in which it was presented. The ambiguity of all language, even genetic, is laid bare here.

This challenge of ambiguity became increasingly significant as the normie-autist habitats overlapped further and further. Facebook's ironic meme community played the central role in accelerating the process of selection for memes which could withstand the extreme volatility of the dualistic habitat. As an integral aspect of the autistic subculture, ironic memes must maintain their ritualistic function of signaling membership to survive. Normification is the dilution of meaning through the introduction of ambiguity. Once the normies "steal" the memes, their power to convey unique meaning wither. It's not just the surface level meaning of "this meme is for oldfags" that is damaged, but the ability for the meme to convey the deeper and implicit sentiments associated with the subculture as a whole, such as "say no to normie consumerism!" or "the Internet is srs bsns!"

And you're goddamn right the Internet is serious business.

Bibliography

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

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2. Cavalli-Sforza, L. L., & Feldman, M. W. (1981). *Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach*. Princeton University Press.

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