

When Images are not Enough: Text Adaptation of the US-based Image Memes into Indonesian Cultural Context

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: adaptation, context, culture, meme, US-based image meme</p> <p>DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v6i2.1046</p> <p>How to cite: Hariyatmi, Sri. (2022). When Images are not Enough: Text Adaptation of the US-based Image Memes into Indonesian Cultural Context. <i>Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics</i>, 6(2), 249-259</p>	<p><i>This present study aims to examine the procedure of adaptation in four selected US-based image memes adapted to the Indonesian context. Four US-based image memes and their Indonesian adaptation were selected as the source of data. They were purposively chosen from some Indonesian memes' websites and the US-based image memes. This study adopts Bastin's theory of adaptation as the theoretical framework to analyze the adaptation procedure used by the Indonesian content creators in adapting the US-based image memes. The analysis of this descriptive qualitative study reveals that from the seven modes of Bastin's adaption, the Indonesian content creators used the sixth procedure, situational or cultural adequacy for the adaptation of the US-based image memes to the Indonesian context. This study concludes that the four selected US-based image memes under the present study have been localized by using Bahasa Indonesia to accommodate the cultural transfer that suits the Indonesian cultural settings. Secondly, Bahasa Indonesia used in the memes assigns a new cultural meaning that is socially understood by Indonesian memetic society. Lastly, this study is hoped to shed a light on the pedagogical field, proposing that cultural awareness is significant in translation to bridge the cultural transfer from the source text to the new target readers.</i></p>

1. Introduction

*Translation is not a matter of words only:
it is a matter of making intelligible the whole culture- Anthony Burgess.*

The study of memes has attracted much attention from the public and academics (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017), for example, a study by Miltner (2014) discovered how several fields such as advertisement, popular TV shows, and even political campaigns have gained new inspiration from internet memes. Eychaner (2016) explored how semantic humor was employed in memes. A similar study related to humor and memes was conducted by Bao

(2016). In his study, he investigated the manifestation of verbal humor and its function in memes. In a similar vein to Bao, Dynel (2016) conducted a study on *mêmes* from the pragmatics approach where she discovered that *mêmes* function as a joke with images and texts- in which the meaning of the joke is less incomprehensible when background knowledge of the *mêmes* is absent. Other types of study involve different topics such as creating a formal definition of internet memes (Diaz, 2013), the power of memes in information (Blackmore, 1999), and the meme's role in conveying a message (Reime, 2000). In addition, some studies on *mêmes* focus on the *éléments* of linguistics used in *mêmes* (Zenner and Geeraerts, 2018) or on the relationship between the visualization and verbal mode in creating the meaning of *mêmes* (Yus, 2019).

Based on the findings from previous research, most created memes use English as their *lingua franca* but, those accessing the internet come from different cultural and linguistic spaces, local adaptation of global memes, therefore is inevitable and occurs frequently (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). The practice of local adaptation of global memes into localized memes has increased since the 2000s (Börzsei, 2013). One of the finest examples of the localized memes is the Occupy Wallstreet which uses local expression to bring a distant issue closer (Blank, 2012; Sparke, 2013). Therefore, when the memes travel across the border, adjusting the text to be understandable and applicable to the culture of the target audience is necessary (Leppänen et al, 2014).

Considering the importance of cultural awareness in understanding the memes, adaptation to target readers' cultural context is therefore inevitable. By doing so, the cultural transfer will be comprehended more conveniently by the new audience (Sanders, 2006: 19). Adaptation, as proposed by Vinay and Dalbernet (1995) is a method or process that can be applied when the target culture does not have the context referring to the original text, in that way, reconstruction or recreation is unavoidable. To put it differently, adaptation is an attempt to accommodate differences in culture that might alter the understanding of the new targeted readers (Bastin and Vandal Sirois, 2012).

Research on *mêmes* adaptation suggests that when *mêmes* 'travel' to different dimensions, they preserve and introduce their source but at the same time they also obtain new meanings. The ability of *mêmes* to naturally participate to be repackaged and reappropriated is one of the conditions whether *mêmes* would become viral (Shifman, 2014). Similar research on how *mêmes* successfully gain different meanings while traveling was conducted by Leineste (2016). In her research, she investigated how people modified or adapted *mêmes* into a local or particular language to deliver the *mêmes* message to the new audiences.

Although some previous research has been conducted focusing on the relationship between cultural background and the meaning transfer of *mêmes* (e.g., Börzsei 2013; Leppänen et al. 2014; Laineste, 2016), the research on memes adaptation within the Indonesian context remains underexplored. This current study is therefore intended to address this gap. Drawing on Bastin's adaptation theory, this study aims to identify and analyze what adaptation procedure (s) are used by Indonesian content creators in adapting the US-based image memes. This study proposes two research questions as the guideline to investigate its arguments:

1. What is the procedure of adaptations employed by Indonesian content creators in the selected US-based image memes?

2. What are the underlying cultural meanings of the adapted text used by the Indonesian content creators?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Memes

Internet memes are "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison, 2012, p.122). The origin of the term "memes" is invented by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. Memes itself is originally taken from the word "mimema", an archaic Greek term that translated into an imitation of something (Shiftman, 2013). Dawkin uses memes to explain "a unit of cultural transmission, analogous as gene, or a unit of imitation in which people can transmit their cultural ideas and "social memories" to each other by copying or imitation (Dawkin, 1976). The term memes commonly refer to "phrases, videos, images, or a combination thereof that generally understood as intending to be found humorous by viewers and are widely disseminated by Internet users" (Chandler, 2013, p. 9). Traditionally, people create memes in a simple form featuring a single word or phrase that sometimes contains an intentionally misspelling word or incorrect grammar. Recently, however, memes have evolved into an image with text, GIFS, videos, or other media containing cultural information (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). With the increased use of the internet, the internet users employed memes as the word to describe "the spread of particular idea presented as written text, image, or some other unit of cultural stuff" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p. 202).

One type of meme is known as an "image macro", meaning the captioned photographic images which normally comprise an image and a catchword (knowyourmeme.com). The catchphrase/text attached to the memes is important in the text-image relations in memes, therefore memes creator purposively works to match the image and the text to deliver the meaning to the viewers (Shifman, 2014). Memes, as Shifman (2013) argues, become a significant part of how people communicate with one another. These memes contain humor or can reflect universal emotions such as sadness, joy, or anger, and depict social-cultural messages (Kariko, 2016). Understanding memes is therefore important to get a reference to understand the digital culture (Borzsei, 2013).

Taking a different point of departure from the afore-mentioned studies on memes, this current study argues that images used in memes are universal regardless of their native origin, secondly, the content creators assign new meaning to the image memes by using certain modes of adaptation procedure. Thus, discovering what mode of adaptation is used by Indonesian content creators and how Indonesian text assigns new meaning to US-based image memes is hoped to offer new insight into the significant rôle of adaptation strategy as well as the underlying belief of the target culture (in this case Indonesian culture).

2.2 Bastin's Adaptation Theory

This study takes refuge in the theoretical framework of Bastin's theory of adaptation (1998). Within this model, adaptation is defined as a translative intervention that produces text represented in the source text but is not accepted as a form of translation. Further, Bastin proposed that although adaptation has always existed, the renaissance of adaptation was in the 17th and 18th centuries when interpreters believed that unfamiliar or imported writings ought to be modified to local flavors to meet the expectation and satisfy the needs of the

target audience (Bastin, 2005). Four conditions lead the translator to coopt with adaptation: (1) cross-code breakdown: when the target language does not have a lexical equivalent for an item in the source text; (2) situational or cultural inadequacy: when the context or views in the source text are not applicable or exist in the target text; (3) genre switching: when there is a need to change from one type of genre to another; (4) disruption of the communication process: when the modification of style and content are required as a result of the rise of a new era, approach, or different readership.

There are seven modes of adaptation procedures as classified by Bastin (2005):

1. Transcription of the original: the word-for-word conversion.
2. Omission: the removal of some part of the source text.
3. Expansion: the addition of some information of the original text in the main body, footnotes, glossaries, or foreword.
4. Exoticism: the adjustment of slang, dialect, and nonsense words in the source text by their equivalents in the target language.
5. Updating: the substitution of obsolete and vague info with modern equivalents.
6. Situational or cultural adequacy: the reproduction of a more familiar context that more suitable for the new audiences
7. Creation: the transfer of the main ideas/ messages/ purposes of the native source.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study is a qualitative content analysis where the data consists of four image memes adaptation and English text used in the US-based image memes. The selected data in this study were obtained from Indonesian websites that have emerged as a response to the popularity of memes in Indonesia such as brilio.net, kapanlagi.com, kaskus.co.id, and memecrunch.org. Google image search engine was used to find the Indonesian adaptation of the US-based image memes by inserting the US-based image memes into the keyword search engine. The first image meme with Indonesian text that appeared on the search engine result was picked up to be used as the data. There are four image memes with Indonesian text used in this study. For the international image, memes are derived from different websites such as memegenerator.net, knowyourmeme.com, makememe.org, and mememaker.net. The image memes were chosen purposively based on the following criteria:

1. The background/ picture of the image meme at least appears on six different websites.
2. There are at least 3 versions of the image meme with English text added.
3. There is at least 1 version of the image meme with Indonesian text added.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedures

Following the data collection process, the four selected English texts in the US-based image memes and their four Indonesian adaptations were analyzed by applying Bastin's adaptation theory to identify and analyze what procedure (s) of adaptation was used by the Indonesian content creators in adapting the four US-based image memes under study. To do this, the English texts of the US-based image memes were presented along with the Indonesian version. The *Bahasa Indonesia* texts on the adapted version were translated into English to analyze Bastin's mode of adaptation that the Indonesian content creators employed in

adapting the US-based image memes. After discovering which Bastin’s adaptation strategy was used by Indonesian content creators, the analysis continued to explore the underlying beliefs of the Indonesian cultural context used by the Indonesian content creator in adapting the international image memes.



4. Findings and Discussion

There are two sub-sections dedicated to analyzing and discussing the findings. The first one is devoted to analyzing what mode of Bastin’s adaptation procedure is used by Indonesian content creators. At this stage, the English text on the US-based image memes was presented along with its Indonesian adaptation to discover which Bastin’s procedure of adaptations was used by the Indonesian content creators. The second sub-section is allocated to explore how the underlying belief in the Indonesian social context is used by the Indonesian content creators to accommodate the cultural transfer from the US-based image memes into the Indonesian target audience.

4.1. Procedures of Adaption Used by Indonesian Content Creator

The four English texts on the US-based image memes are presented in a table with the Indonesian adaptation along with its English translation to identify what Bastin’s adaptation procedure is employed. After that, the English translation of the image adaptation’s captions from the Indonesian text was compared with the English text on the US-based image memes to identify the adaptation model in each image adaptation.

Table. 1 Bastin’s Mode of Adaptation Used by Indonesian Content Creator

No	English Text on the US-based Image Memes	Indonesian Adaptation	Possible English Translation of the Adapted Text	Bastin’s Mode of Adaptation
1	<p>//Is it true ?// Yes, Hillary is running for president.//</p> <p>source:mememonkey.com</p>	 <p>source:kaskus.co.id</p>	<p>//“Dad....I spent US\$ 0.050 for the photocopy.”// “So what?”// But I paid US\$ 0.50 for the parking fee.”//</p>	Situational or cultural adequacy
2	<p>//So you’re telling me removing statues are going to create peace !//</p> <p>source: makememe.org</p>	 <p>source:brilio.net</p>	<p>//“Asking when I will get married, every day.// “As if you will pay for my wedding party.”//</p>	Situational or cultural adequacy

<p>3</p>	<p>//Room mate bought rice.// Uncle Ben's'//</p> <p>source: memegenerator.net</p>	 <p>source:kapanlagi.com</p>	<p>//"Returning from homecoming without religious day allowance."//</p>	<p>Situational or cultural adequacy</p>
<p>4</p>	<p>// 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'// Psalm 23</p> <p>source: brilio.net</p>	 <p>source:twitter.com</p>	<p>//"Fuck you!"//</p>	<p>Situational or cultural adequacy</p>

The above table shows that all the adapted text used by the Indonesian content creators on the selected image memes in this study completely 'betray' the real meaning of the English text used in the US-based image memes. Based on the finding presented in table 1, it can be seen that Indonesian content creators tend to use the sixth mode of Bastin's adaptation theory: situational or cultural adequacy. This strategy was chosen as the content creators tried to employ familiar and appropriate cultural expressions for the Indonesian target audiences. The strategy is in line with Bastin and Darbelnet 's (1995:39) point that when faced with "cultural issues that might affect the target readers' understanding, adaptation is necessary to be conducted". Using word-for-word translation, adding additional information, or transferring the main idea of the source text might be considered not sufficient to create contextual familiar meaning for the new target audiences.

The Indonesian content creators' decision in assigning the Indonesian language to the adapted US-based image memes is their strategy to accommodate the cultural acceptability of the meaning of adapted US-based image memes. Without adapting the English text into the Indonesian context, the produced target text would be weak (Bastin and Dalbernet, 1995) and incomprehensible to the target culture audiences. The new adapted text, however, might be perceived as meaningless for a global audience. They may find that the text attached to the US-based image memes by Indonesian content creators is illogical as they do not share the background knowledge of Indonesian culture. Nonetheless, the situational adaptation that the Indonesian content creators employed is their way to accommodate the context and cultural background of the US-based image memes that cannot be appropriately applied to the Indonesian target culture.

To put it in different words, a meme is a piece of culture; the contextual setting is always involved when content creators create their memes. The content creator can use/adapt the existing US-based image memes and localize them into their culture (Indonesian culture) by attaching Indonesian text that is contextually understood by the creators and their society.

Hence, this finding is in line with Distin's (2005) suggestions that the idea presented in memes is equivalent to a particular social environment. From this discussion, it can be seen that the image in memes is universal and can be localized into a different culture by adapting different text (language) from their cultural background.

4.2 The Underlying Belief of Indonesian Culture in the Adaptation of US-Based Image Memes

As memes use certain popular culture ideas from a particular culture, without the knowledge and awareness of their cultural background, the viewers will find it difficult to understand the intention of the creator expressed in the memes. This subsection is allocated to analyze the contextual background of the selected image memes in this study to interpret the meaning of the content creators' ideas expressed as the text caption on the selected US-based image memes. When Indonesian content creators use *Bahasa Indonesia* and attach it to the US-based image memes they use the sixth mode of Bastin's adaptation theory to deliver their message to the Indonesian viewers. By doing so, they change the meaning of the original version to be understood by Indonesian viewers. This strategy is well-known as "cultural substitution" where the text from a foreign linguistic source is modified into local culture to adjust to the target audience (Heylen, 1993).

As can be seen from Table.1, it is obvious that the Indonesian content creators adapt the existing Western popular culture artifacts and adjust them to the Indonesian context. To understand the popular artifact of the US adapted image memes, viewers need certain background knowledge to understand those memes as in every corner of the globe, each country, place, and the city has different characteristics, customs, culture, traditions, or even religious and spiritual background (Stojchevska & Shalveska, 2018).

All the US-based image memes under the present study were adapted by the Indonesian content creator to accommodate the new Indonesian readership. The first US-based image meme would be meaningful for the Americans to grasp its meaning because they know who Hilary is and in what context the meme was created. For Indonesian viewers, however, unless they have a contextual background about the political situation in the US, they would not successfully understand the meaning of the memes regardless of their ability to understand English. However, the adapted text can be loosely translated into English as "Dad....I paid a photocopy for US\$ 0.050"// "And?"// But I paid US\$ 0.50 for the parking fee," which provides new meaning that is comprehensible for Indonesian readers. The text shows that the boy is upset because the parking fee is fourth times higher than the photocopy fee. By adapting the text, a new meaning to the US-based image memes is assigned in the Indonesian cultural context. As a result, although the image meme is taken from the US popular movie *Finding Neverland* which some Indonesian might never watch, the localized text attached to the image meme enables Indonesians to understand the intended meaning of the image meme adaptation.

The second meme shows a kid with somehow an annoyed facial expression in front of a woman, presumably asking him an annoying question. The English question showed that the boy questioned the woman, presumably representing a Caucasian American woman if removing statues would create peace. Although most Americans would understand the message of the meme, it would be hard to say the same way for Indonesian viewers. Unless the Indonesians study American history or keep updated with the latest happening in the US,

they would not grab that the meme satirized the removal of the Confederate statues in the US as a response to the murder of George Floyd in late May 2020 (Ortiz, 2020). The adapted text: "*Tiap hari nanya kapan nikah. Emangnya mau bayarin kateringnya?*" (Translated: "Asking when I will get married, every day as if you will pay for my wedding party. "Will you pay for my wedding?") offers a better portrayal of Indonesian society regarding marriage. The adapted text sounded like a sarcastic question implying that the woman should mind her own business. Marriage is an overrated issue in Indonesia as it is considered the highest level of social achievement. Being single is perceived as a sign of incompleteness and undesirable status, therefore singles are "targeted with derogatory stereotypes" (de Paulo and Morris, 2011). Singlehood in Indonesia is more than just the absence of a life partner, but is also a choice that may encounter negative social and psychological effects (Himawan, Bambling, & Edirippulige, 2018).

The adapted text is the most widely question given to single Indonesian and women as singleness is perceived as a sign of incompleteness and undesirable status, therefore singles are "targeted with derogatory stereotypes" (de Paulo and Morris, 2011). Therefore, the question of marriage will forever haunt all single men and women in Indonesia. Unlike Western society which values personal privacy highly, Indonesian society considers that asking personal information such as age and marital status are normal questions (Himawan, 2018). As meaningless as it can be to the US society, the adapted text has successfully captured the predicament of singleness in Indonesia. Having said all the bitterness of being single in Indonesia, the adapted text assigned to the US-based image meme perfectly captures the predicament of Indonesia singles. The adapted text portrays a better image of Indonesian society and is easier for Indonesian to digest the meaning than the removal of statues as the caption in the US-based image meme.

The third mème as shown in table 1 is created with specific reference to the US popular culture by using Toby Mc Quire crying face as the image background and culturally embedded text/ caption to help the viewers understand the meme. The meme audiences who speak English along with the background knowledge and cultural awareness of the US culture will understand what the meme is about. However, this meme is meaningless for Indonesian even if they are familiar with Toby "Spiderman" Mc Quire. The reason is that Indonesian do not share similar contexts which are adopted in the meme. It will be hard for Indonesian to understand the memes as Uncle Ben rice, one of the most sought-after instant rice in the US does not exist in Indonesia. It is also unusual for Indonesian to buy parboiling rice, that is why they might recognize who Toby is, yet they would fail to understand the intended message that the meme wants to deliver. That is why the new adapted text: "Returning from homecoming without the religious day allowance" would make the image memes better understood by the Indonesian viewers who have the cultural context of the annual religious allowance commemorating the biggest religious celebration in Indonesia, *Eid Al Fitr*. Hence, the memes with specific references to a certain popular culture, or region as well as country will be meaningless to people not residing or living there (Stojchevska & Shalveska, 2018).

The last US meme alludes to the Holy bible verse about bravery. Cat walking in front of dogs is considered an act of bravery as the verse from the Bible attached. The American viewers will not find any obstacle to digesting the meaning of the memes as they are culturally close to Christianity. In Indonesia, where most of its population is Muslim, it might be difficult to understand the relationship between cat and bravery. For most Indonesian, cats are

considered animals closely related to Muslim culture. Therefore, it would be uncommon if cats that are considered "Muslim" in Indonesian culture, to recite verses from the Holy Bible saying that they are brave enough to walk in front of dogs. The content creator, however, does not replace the verse from the Holy Bible in the US-based image memes with Quranic verse for the cat to recite. The content creator might hold a belief that it is unfair to assign a particular religious affiliation to the cats. Therefore, the content creator adapted English text by replacing it with the word "asu". "Asu" is, the literal word for dog in Javanese (language spoken by people living in the central and eastern part of Java island). It is equal to f**k in English and is the high-level swearword for Indonesians that is used either for joking or swearing just like the way Americans use the word f**k.

Using *Bahasa Indonesia* is, therefore, the content creator's strategy to assign new meaning to the US-based image memes and make them culturally comprehensible by most Indonesian memes' viewers. Although one of the text adaptations uses the Javanese language *asu* for the word dog, most Indonesian understand what *asu* means in *Bahasa Indonesia* and can use it in the Indonesian social context. The chosen language used by the Indonesian content creators is related to the cultural context where the "meaning of a word is understood by participants based on cultural factors (Casson, 1981, p.17). As such, it is an intentionally deliberate decision of marketing strategy to comply with the market expectation (Ali, Karen, & Sanders, 2003).

5. Conclusion

To summarize, the implications of the present study will be presented based on the finding and discussion. First, the Indonesian content creator utilized the situational or cultural adequacy procedure, the sixth mode of Bastin's adaptation theory to adapt the US-based image meme to Indonesian settings. This strategy is selected to bridge the cultural background that is more suitable for the target audience. Second, the Indonesian content creator assigned *Bahasa Indonesia* in adapting the US-based image memes to adjust to the Indonesian readerships that mostly do not speak English. By adapting the text to the US-based image memes, a new comprehensible meaning for target readers can be achieved. Altogether, the situational or cultural adequacy mode of adaptation that the Indonesian content creators employed to adapt the US-based image memes provided the context of the topic discussed in the memes. This is done to comprehend the intended meaning that the meme's creator tries to deliver. Lastly, the findings of this study complement the study of adaptation and memes study, especially on the strategy of language adaptation that the contents creators adapted to adapt the image memes. The choice of language is culture-loaded, meaning, it conveys the culture and habits of Indonesian society. Cultural awareness or background knowledge, therefore, is one of the important factors for the memes creator to assign meaning to their image meme's adaptation or memes creation. The finding of this study hopefully could shed a light in the translation field on the importance of cultural awareness as the bridge to transfer cultural context from one language to another.

5.1. Limitations & Suggestions for Future Studies

One of the primary findings of this study provides the readers with an underlying belief in Indonesian cultural settings based on the adapted text assigned to the US-based image memes. The major weakness of this study is the dependability of the analysis solely on my native knowledge of Indonesian culture, a degree in American Studies, and my first-hand

experience living in the US which increased my awareness of the US cultural context. These factors might highly influence the result of this study. Future studies might consider using questionnaires and interviews to discover if the type of adaptation procedure in adapting global images into a local context is acceptable or comprehensible to the target culture audiences.

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