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CONTAGION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE: THE REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN COVID-19 MEMES

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a pre-eminent tool of civic engagement and political expression, and has played a significant role in shaping public discourse during the recent global pandemic. Memes are vital markers for communicating public sentiment during a period of enforced social isolation which has confined citizens around the world to their homes. Inspired by linguistic studies of media and contemporary practices of informational framing, the paper aims to probe the humorous effects of Covid memes as emblematic of a range of discursive responses to this unprecedented crisis. It asks why certain memes are felt to be funnier than others, and probes effects at the interface of humour with personal ideologies.

The paper explores the representation of Nature in such memes, from an interdisciplinary perspective that comprises Media Theory and Linguistics. It identifies features of memes from a Multimodal perspective (Kress 2010) that probes their pragmatic significance (Kecskes 2013). The study identifies humorous effects, noting that these may at times conflict with readers' habitual assumptions, thus provoking thought and potentially affecting behavior on key social issues.

Keywords: Memes, Covid-19, Pragmatics, Environmentalism, implicit ideology

INTRODUCTION. COVID AND THE ANTHROPAUSE

This paper is being written during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, more than a year in and still with no definite prospects of a return to normal life. The socio-economic and political structures of the world have arguably been disrupted more by the virus than by any other global event since the Second World War. In early 2021, the IMF reported that most countries were in recession, with rising unemployment rates: among other sectors badly hit were High Street shops, as well as the tourism and travel industries (Jones, 2021). The lockdown measures that were introduced in most countries to curb the spread of the disease produced many side-effects, some of which were positive from an environmental perspective. People stopped using their cars or public transport for work or leisure purposes, travel by plane for business or pleasure was severely limited, and many factories went into stand-by or were closed because of the collapse in demand for their products. All this had environmental consequences, which were undoubtedly positive, considering the significant reduction in CO₂ emissions entailed by the sudden cessation of all this human activity, and the neologism 'anthropause' was coined to describe these effects.

In the pre-Covid context, environmental discourse was already firmly on the agendas of news agencies and governments around the world, since there appears to be general consensus around the Doomsday predictions of climate scientists, who warn that unless industrial practices are rapidly transformed, the planet's biosphere will

suffer permanent damage. This consensus has led to the progressive transformation of everyday social practices in ecological directions, environmental lobbies organizing mass protests in many world capitals, and at the level of government élites the signing of a series of climate protocols, each one more draconian than its predecessor, though apparently equally unlikely to be implemented.

In the early period of the lockdown images began to appear, on media and social media, of the empty streets in global capitals, empty highways that would normally be full of traffic, airports with no flights, and so on. Skies and seas were reportedly bluer, wildlife responded to the absence of human bustle by reclaiming urban spaces, and stories underlining a rekindling of an environmental sensibility began to circulate. For a short time it appeared that Covid-19, at least temporarily, was moving the world in the direction laid out by the climate protocols (Bashir et al., 2020). As El Zowalaty et al (2020) argue, though these positive environmental effects may disappear with returning normality, they had the effect of justifying long-term policy decisions taken at a global political level to ‘improve air quality, and reduce the carbon footprint which will translate to improved environmental health’.

Social media platforms have flourished during the pandemic, acting as substitutes for person to person contact, providing forums for the exchange of views, the display of creativity and the expression of satirical social commentary, frequently directed at governments’ handling of the crisis. The perspective that the virus was engaged in an ecological mission, intervening on the side of a planet driven to exhaustion by man’s voracious exploitation of its resources, began to circulate in the early months of lockdown. Tweets such as one about swans “returning” to Venice, or a video that supposedly showed dolphins swimming in the canals, went viral (Daly, 2020). One phrase, in particular, caught the public imagination: ‘Nature is healing. We are the virus’. However, with passing time the truth of such posts emerged: in these specific cases, the swans were shown to be habitually present in the area, while the dolphins had been filmed in faraway Sardinia. Skepticism over such environmental claims was not limited to debunking the falsehoods, but led to the appearance of a whole series of parallel memes, satirizing the notion of nature healing through ridiculous shots of giraffes, for example, ‘returning’ to their natural habitats in a British town center.

In this paper, we follow this online debate and explore the construction of meaning, pragmatic significance and humorous impact of such natural, environmentally-oriented memes that circulated on social media during the Covid-19 crisis.

Memes

The notion that the term ‘meme’ may be appropriately applied to a multimodal internet artefact depends on an analogy between the transmission of human qualities through genetics (Dawkins, 2016) and the transfer of thoughts, ideas and points of view through the worldwide web. Because of their capacity to encapsulate ideology in a single, punchy image, memes have a leading role among cultural jammers around the web (Friesinger et al., 2010). Creators of memes are content when their work achieves visibility, ‘going viral’, since apart from personal gratification they may also receive economic rewards.

Currently, memes play a significant role in political persuasion, as was shown by the example of the last US president Donald Trump, who was able to bypass traditional media outlets and contact supporters directly through the social media platform Twitter. Another advantage of such communication was that it also bypassed the truth-value checks that are necessary in traditional media outlets, enabling the president to harness popular support for opinions that only masqueraded as facts (Ott, 2017; Fuchs, 2018).

In Trump’s case, his wide political base enabled him to reach a vast audience but, in order to gain access to a debate and influence opinions, most meme artists depend on the intrinsic qualities of their work. If a meme is liked it will be commented on by users, re-tweeted, shared on Facebook or Instagram, and trace a brief trajectory across the horizons of cyberspace. As Mason (2012) says:

Ideas arise, are immediately ‘market tested’, and then are seen to either takeoff, bubble under, insinuate themselves into the mainstream, or, if they are deemed no good, disappear

Although they clearly do align with other genres of persuasive discourse such as advertising, party political broadcasts, charity appeals (Virtanen & Halmari, 2005), it is not entirely clear how memes carry out this

function. A strong view, recalling the biological origins of the ‘meme as virus’ metaphor, would suggest that the creator’s desired message is somehow implanted directly into the receivers’ minds, without reference to their volitional processes (Chilton, 2005; Hancock, 2010). Other perspectives view memes as addictive candy for minds that influence opinions and suggest provocative positions, though they may not necessarily win over their viewers(Jenkins, 2009).

Importantly, the availability of access to the worldwide web means that anyone with creativity, a point of view and an internet connection can participate in these processes. Thus, the space of debate for political topics such as global warming is immensely enlarged, democratized and freed from the domination of traditional forms of media. Finally, it should be remembered that, if memes do indeed have the potential to influence hearts and minds, then they can also affect behavior(Mina, 2019), thus may be seen as an authentic component in the political process.

METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Our assumption is that the interpretation of memes entails the application of the same kinds of processes as are engaged in the normal explication of visual and verbal messages. A useful first step into the terrain of discourse pragmatics is provided by Van Dijk (2000), who considers that the interpretation of an utterance (and, by extension, this also applies to an image, or a combination of text and image, as in a standard meme) depends on factors such as *world knowledge*, *syntactic structures*, *topics*, *discourse structures* and *aspects of context*, on the basis of which ‘provisional meanings’ are contemplated by the subject. In Van Dijk’s words, speakers follow mental processes that may be summarized as ‘by saying A, the speaker probably implies that B, C and D’. The precise mental pathways are as yet imperfectly understood, but the factors of *relevance*(Wilson, 1994; Sperber & Wilson, 1995)and *salience*(Kecskes, 2016)are considered important.



Figure One: flying dolphins meme¹

For example, in figure one (above), the principle of salience means that the viewer focuses attention on the leaping figures of the dolphins in the foreground. As the ‘Actors’ in the scene they are, according to Kress & Leeuwen (2010: 63), the most salient participants in the image. Salience in this case means that the viewers’ minds are centrally preoccupied with sorting through hypotheses that regard the dolphins rather than, for example, considering the typology of cloud, or wondering what time of day the photo was taken. Less obviously, analysis of the accompanying text finds three separate salient points:

- a) Air traffic has slowed so much
- b) Dolphins are returning to the sky

¹(Ebaum, 2020)

c) We are the virus

These three propositions contain the essence of the writer's intended message, and explication is carried out by viewers using the criterion of *relevance*. At a basic level, proposition b) confirms the message of the image, which shows airborne dolphins. However, the semantics of the verb 'to return' entail (Murphy, 2010) a further proposition, as follows: *dolphins used to live in the sky*. This proposition, in turn, entails further propositions that may or not be called upon consciously by the viewer, i.e. *something happened to drive them from the sky* that *something was human air traffic*, and so on. Parenthetically, we see why memes generally combine image and text, a combination which (Mitchell, 1986) appropriately called image-text. The textual component is needed because there is no way that the grammatical category of past habit indicated by the verb 'used to' can be realized pictorially.

The meme takes for granted world knowledge of the Covid pandemic, and this is necessary to understand proposition a), i.e. Viewers know that the reason air traffic has slowed so much is because of the virus and the consequent cancellation of flights. Implicit in these interpretative processes is also knowledge of animal behavior, which could be present in latent assumptions such as that: *animals prefer pristine habitats and will avoid areas that are too visibly affected by the hand of man*. Somewhere behind, in, or surrounding these quasi-instantaneous cognitive passages, which Leech (1983) refers to as processes of 'informal rational problem-solving' is the manifest knowledge that the image is unrealistic, because we know that 'dolphins can't fly'. Confronted by this contradiction of their world knowledge, the viewer finds a resolution of their difficulty in proposition c), 'we are the virus'. This proposition also requires interpretative work (who are 'we'? Probable answer – *the whole human race*. Why are we a 'virus'? Probable answer – *because our techno society has polluted the dolphin's natural environment*, etc.).

Our paper also considers the pragmatics of humorous effects, asking why the artifacts in question are funny in the first place, and the role played by humor in the memes' overall effectiveness. Humor theory has mainly accounted for the humorous effect with reference to three principles: *superiority, relief of tension and incongruity* (Dyrel, 2013). Of these, the last appears to be, overwhelmingly, the most characteristic of the kind of meme we are dealing with, and we will accordingly concentrate on this type of effect, originally proposed by Schopenhauer (1969), and featured in numerous modern studies (e.g. (Ritchie, 2004; Morreall 2009; Simpson 1998, 2009, etc.)). Schopenhauer (ibid: 76) calls incongruity 'the cause of laughter', and it has undoubtedly been much exploited in modern comicity. For example, the celebrated 'Ministry of Silly Walks' sketch² in which a comedian, in the formal dress of a London clerk, prances about an office, is arguably amusing because of the contrast between the sober connotations of location and dress, and the incongruity of the man's behavior.

In the above meme, the effect is more subtle. Without the accompanying text, the image is simply incongruous, perhaps representing a whimsical flight of fancy. The text, however, underlines the ideational status of the image as 'reality', insisting that the viewer's mind confront the blatant contradiction between the image as it stands and their world knowledge, which remains firm in the conviction that what is seen cannot in any sense be real. In order to resolve the contradiction, the hypothesis of humorous intent offers the viewer a way out.

To see the funny side of the meme and hence, to process the artefact correctly according to its creator's intentions, it helps if the viewer is aware of the kind of environmental memes it parodies. Because the viewer has a mental backdrop of numerous memes decrying man's harmful impact on the natural world, this meme enacts a type of *reductio ad absurdum* argument that works against such environmental attitudes, exposing environmental ideas and principles to laughter-inspiring derision.

We suggest, in fact, that provoking a humorous response is only part of the meme's purpose; indeed, it could be that provoking laughter is only a superficial, or secondary aim. To return to the notion of memes as akin to viruses, the ostensible humorous intent could be a means whereby the covert message bypasses possible

²You Tube. Ministry of Silly Walks. Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCLp7zodUiI&ab_channel=Plymhstnet, last visit 30.03.2021.

defensive shields and gains access to cognitive centers in the recipients, and thus achieves its true, persuasive purpose. Here, for example, the viewer is aligned – willingly or not – with the anti-environmental proposition that it is ridiculous to consider the human race as a virus.

Environmental memes and spoofs

Figure two (below) shows two memes whose underlying inspiration is environmental:



Figure 2(a) 'Be a lot cooler'

Figure 2 (b) Kermit

In 2 (a), the humor works by exploiting the double meaning of the word 'cool', which refers both to a physical temperature and a sort of disposition or social evaluation in the adjective 'cool' that signifies trendiness among the young and wannabe young; a usage which spread round the globe mainly thanks to the hit American TV show 'Happy Days' in the 1960s, and is still surviving. The scene is a rather vague shot, with the foregrounded character, the driver, presumably the source of the anti-environmental message which the latter is contesting. Inferentially, the picture is as follows:

Says	Implies
A: I don't believe in global warming	-
B: Be a lot cooler if you did.	a) If you changed your beliefs on that point it would improve you as a person, <i>and</i> b) The planet would be cooler too

Table One: figure 2 implicatures

The ambiguity in B's comment is helped by the elision of subject, which leaves in doubt whether the full phrase would have been 'you would' or 'it would'. In the first case, the inference is that speaker B believes that 'cool' people, i.e. Trendy people are those who accept the climate change hypothesis, so A would do himself a favor by changing his views. In the second, the speaker implies that if you – and, by extension, if all of us – accepted the climate change hypothesis, the temperature of the planet would be a lot cooler in the physical sense, because there would be a significant change in human behavior.³

In 2 (b), the underlying 'environmental' ideology of the creator can be deduced from the fact that the central character wants to 'slap' the unknown person with the anti-climate change hypothesis view quoted. A slap is a physical punishment whose use is nowadays socially frowned upon, but which was once frequently administered to children. One inference of the frog's choice of reading matter, therefore, could be that the notion, that climate change is simply part of natural cycles, is an immature, childish view that deserves this kind of physical correction.

³Analysis of this meme's humorous effect ends here, because the writers lack any further cultural knowledge about the image that may be relevant in interpretation. For instance, the characters may appear in a well-known sitcom or motion picture; one may be a notorious climate change denier, etc. Those factors, part of the world knowledge viewers bring to the interpretation process, naturally affect the overall 'meaning' of the meme.

Humorous effect is, of course, a subjective matter, but in these environmental memes neither are likely to provoke a belly laugh. The effect in each case is rather preachy, or politically correct, as the dominant perspective in each puts down a view which goes against the prevailing orthodoxy current in our society, i.e. that global warming is a scientifically demonstrated fact. There is some incongruity in 2 (b) in that it features a frog who can read and use the internet. However, its effect is diminished considerably because the frog is the well-known muppet Kermit, from whom viewers are primed to expect the demonstration of a range of human attributes. We are not surprised to find that a singing, dancing, wise-cracking frog can also use the internet.

We now turn to consider the ‘anti-environmental’ memes (figure three, below). Curiously, it was not possible to recover the original ‘nature is healing, we are the virus’ memes, since a goggle search simply throws up spoofs such as those in figure three; the original, environmental meme is still presumably somewhere on the internet, but is hard to find. The two memes below are included as representative of a fertile sub-genre containing memes with common features such as the slogan and the use of animals in unusual places.

The first image is rather incongruous but not impossible, since cows are known to frequent beaches and even swim. What pushes it into the realm of the fantastic is the accompanying text:

Cows are returning to the sea. Nature is healing. We are the virus.

The inference, as in the dolphin meme discussed above, is that cows are returning to their natural habitat, a habitat from which human activity had displaced them and which, now that coronavirus has enforced a global reduction in carbon emissions, is once more viable. Thus, the meme pursues an ostensibly environmental train of reasoning, whose bedrock ideological position is the view discussed by Hern (1993), of humanity as cancerous growth, a perversion of natural processes rather than an authentic part of nature itself. The meme, in fact, mimics the form of the original ‘nature returning’ story concerning the dolphins in Venice discussed above, which was later revealed as a falsehood.



Figure 3 (a) Cows returning to the sea, Figure 3 (b) Cats on bus

However, as in the flying dolphin meme, this train of reasoning is ruled out of court by a conflicting proposition suggested by the viewer’s world knowledge, to the effect that ‘*the natural habitat of cows is not the sea*’; cows are primarily land animals used to chewing the cud in fields. The mind is presented with a paradox that can only be resolved by rejecting the truth status of one of the conflicting propositions. In other words, one of the following two propositions must be false:

- a): *Cows are returning to the sea. Nature is healing. We are the virus,*
- b): *the natural habitat of cows is not the sea but the land*

Viewers’ world knowledge about the natural habitat of cows, confirmed by a lifetime of experience, means that the second proposition is unlikely to be questioned. More likely is that the mind will deny factual status to proposition a), interpreting it as an instance of incongruity for comic effect. The effect is heightened by use of the pictorial medium, whose potential for conveying ideational realities is well-known and forms the basis of much modern journalism, which purports to show the viewer what is happening around the world in real time.

The camera cannot lie, and if cows were to return to the sea, the event would have precisely the appearance that we observe in the picture. Thus, the erroneous interpretation is given plausibility by this pictorial ‘evidence’.

Once this interpretative ‘work’ has been completed – and studies suggest that the cognitive processes involved are all but instantaneous (Luciano et al., 2009; Tovee, 2013)– the viewer is enabled to find comic release in the contemplation of ridiculous mental images that might arise, for instance of cows grazing on the bottom of the sea, in their ‘natural’ aquatic habitats.

The same analytical reflections apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to image 3 (b). The text implies that cats have been absent from buses for a long time (‘wildlife is *finally* returning’). In the imagined world implied by this text, buses were designed for cats, and humans have excluded them for a long time. As with the cows’ absence from their natural habitat, this state of affairs amounts to a ‘wound’ for nature, and the return of cats to buses signals the beginning of a ‘healing’ process. The incongruity arises not so much from the sight of cats on buses, but from their being on them in the absence of human owners. Ironically, the ‘return’ is not to a natural habitat such as a forest landscape but to a quintessentially urban environment; the cats are shown performing actions, like going to the shops or to work, which human beings, now in lockdown, are unable to do.

DISCUSSION

Underlying most, if not all, memes, is an *ideology* of some kind. The term refers to the ‘positions, attitudes, beliefs and perspectives ‘of social groups, which naturally have the capacity to influence the political process (Fairclough, 2003: 9). This is not to imply that the creators of the memes discussed in this paper are engaged in a conscious political project; rather that their (possibly unconscious) political/ideological positions affect the meme production process, and in turn are passed on in the meme, to have an effect on the hearts and/or minds of viewers. Thus, our perspective on memes is to view them as inherently engaged in persuasive/political activity, at the level of person to person alignment, where the message designer seeks support for their view on a specific topic, which has a political dimension. Support for this view can be found in the fact that it is possible to derive, from both sets of the above memes, a covert system of argumentation which nests within the memes’ ostensibly entertaining exterior, and/or a deontological position on the issue in question. In the environmental memes, the underlying ideology is ‘environmentalism’, however that is defined (Pepper, 1996). The covert argument in 2(a), for example, is:

Since (first premise): The planet is warming up

And since (second premise): If everybody changed their social practices we could cool it down.

Therefore (conclusion): You should change your outlook and your behavior.

The picture is more complex for the anti-environmental memes, which do not advocate a course of action to follow. Instead of the ‘ought’ dimension of Searle’s phrase, from ‘ought to is’ (Searle, 1969), they rather concentrate on the ‘is’, attempting to drive home the notion that ‘we are the virus’. In both (and in many of the other spoof memes of the series), the argumentation is:

Since (first premise): Animals are returning to their natural habitats.

And since (second premise): This is happening because of lockdown and the reduction in human activity due to Covid.

Therefore (conclusion): We are the real virus

As the public have been made well aware, the coronavirus is enabled to penetrate the cell wall by means of a protein ‘spike’ (Belouzard et al., 2012). In this paper, guided by the soft science of metaphor, we advance the tentative suggestion that a meme’s humorous effect may play the part of this spike, i.e. it allows the meme to bond with the host structure, permitting the ‘virus’ of the meme’s underlying ideological content to pass into, and thus ‘infect’ the receiver’s mind. Such a view is, in fact, in line with the spirit of Dawkins’ original work on the subject (Dawkins, *ibid*). The powers of memes, in this perspective, are analogous to the kind of ‘brainwashing’ potentialities found in advertising images, where the intention is to implant systems of product evaluation, controlling and stimulating the viewers’ desires (Woods, 2006: 12).

Whether they do it consciously or unconsciously, therefore, the designers of the memes studied above aim at aligning viewers' minds around their favored positions on environmental issues. This – latent or manifest – political motivation is, arguably, likely to be more marked in the case of the environmental memes. In a sense, their creators jump on an already galloping bandwagon of ecological sensibility, whose overt aim is to significantly alter public consciousness, in order to bring about massive changes in social organization and human behavior(Wissenburg&Escruihuela, 2014). Creators of the 'anti-environmental' memes, by contrast, may not be engaged in pushing an agenda; it is possible that they are simply resisting an interpretation of human activity felt to be too extreme, or erroneous. Such a view of their motives would match them with others who resist the tide of political correctness(Fairclough, 2003b) which, in this area, holds that global warming is real and catastrophe imminent.

This line of thinking may appear paradoxical, since it would imply that environmental positions have become a dominant ideology in our societies, against which it is politically incorrect to talk, even to think. Yet, though there is concrete evidence to show that human social practices have become greener over past generations in response to the discursive pressure of environmental lobbying, it is hard not to feel that the giant multinational corporations extracting fossil fuels still retain real power and that, in political terms, environmental friendliness is the choice of individuals rather than the policy of states.

At this point, it is worth returning to another aspect of the paper mentioned briefly above, to reconsider the question of comic effect. Memes tend to belong to the genre of verbal/visual *satire*, an eminently persuasive rhetorical device (Gruner, 1965) which generally serves the ends of the socially weak, and speaks the truth to power(Feltmate, 2013). Effective satire has an exhilarating, liberating effect, which (Hooley, 2007: 8)compares to that of a carnival, describing it as a social exercise

Wherein the enslaved, suppressed, and marginalized of us have our moment of exuberant license before the clamps come down again paradoxically, though this is of course a subjective finding, this element of liberation is arguably stronger in the spoof memes than in the environmental ones. These memes foreground unfashionable views, which go against the grain of scientific thinking and also the prevailing currents of public sentiment. To publicly claim that global warming is part of the earth's natural cycles nowadays is to express a minority view, however closely it may harmonies with the interests of the planet's most powerful polluters. In the environmental memes, what happens is that the resolution - the triumphant assertion of the environmental point of view - has the effect of a 'clamp down', to use Hooley's image. The 'exuberant license', which is once more imprisoned, would be the notion that, just maybe, the global warming hypothesis is not true. The speaker who voices this opinion cries out in protest against a kind of 'eco Fascism' (Lawton, 2019) dictated by the politically correct climate discourse that flows every day from the chat rooms and news desks of mainstream media.

Precisely the same considerations apply to the memes in figure three, with the difference that, in this case, the clamps do not return. They, and other memes in the series, leave us in a carnival of flying dolphins, swimming cows, city center giraffes and so on, temporarily freed from the oppressive sense of guilt over the fact that the planet will soon become uninhabitable and it will all be our fault.

CONCLUSION

From a theoretical perspective, the paper has underlined the central role played by pragmatic factors in the humorous effect, noted in other studies(Dynel, 2011).The question of why something is funny is still opaque, despite centuries of theorization. What is also unclear, and has received much less attention, is the question of degree – why one joke or sketch should be viewed as very funny, another as mildly amusing, and so on. That humor is largely a subjective matter is widely accepted, though attempts have been made to theorize about objective features, as with *incongruity*, as discussed above. In this concluding section we offer some reflections concerning another theory of comicity, which centers on the notion of *relief of tension*. This approach, which draws on Freudian theories(Morreall, 2009)suggests that jokes can release the energy expended by rationality to repress 'infantile nonsense and tendentious feelings' (Carroll, 2014).As we argued, in the last section, the non-

environmental memes were felt to be funnier than the environmental ones, though we did also stress that this is a subjective response. However, the notion is lent some support by the fact that the original ‘nature is healing. We are the virus’ meme (or memes, if the original spawned a mini-genre) appears to have vanished without trace, while the spoofs flourished at the time and still survive, a year on.⁴

It is also curious that this comic effect appears to override the question of ideological alignment. Both writers of this paper are fully convinced of the correctness of the human-driven climate change hypothesis, and see the necessity for dramatic socio-political changes if the worst is to be avoided; yet we laugh at memes whose covert persuasive intention, we have suggested, is to help spread an opposite viewpoint to our own. To account for this apparent paradox, the relief hypothesis is a useful resource.

For many years now, public environmental discourse has been accumulating evidence regarding CO₂emissions. Before the pandemic, it was normal to hear discussions on media about reducing one’s personal ‘carbon footprint’, so that it was possible for the average citizen to feel that their own commonplace practices like driving to work, turning on the aircon, leaving the computer on standby, flying to holiday destinations, and so on, were partially responsible for the approaching catastrophe. Elderly and middle-aged first worlders are made to feel that they are leaving their children a devastated world, whose surface may soon resemble that of the Planet Venus. One comprehensible response to this social pressure is to develop guilt feelings, which no amount of participation in rituals of differentiated rubbish collection can wholly set to rest. As we have discussed, above, the spoof memes present a paradox which viewers resolve by rejecting the truth value of the artefact in question. We are certain, for example, that the natural habitat of cows is not the sea; hence, we reject the meme *tout court*, and with it, crucially, we also reject the notion that ‘we are the virus’. For an instant, as our unconscious selfrevels in the idea that we are not responsible, after all, for the current environmental mess, we let go of that guilt and – so the theory would have it – laughter is the result.

Finally, from an ecolinguistic perspective, it is worth pausing to consider whether the position of these supposedly ‘anti-environmental’ memes is really so wide of the mark – or rather, whether it is actually fair to blame the (wo) man in the street for global warming. Arguably, instead of a bottom up perspective, a top-down one would be more appropriate, and we should rather hold to account global élite social actors, especially multinational corporations and governments, who have the power to bring about real change. As has been said, the recent past has seen the proliferation of social initiatives that underscore the notion of individual responsibility in climate matters and, while such measures no doubt have a value, there is a danger that they may also obfuscate the roles played by much more significant factors, thereby making real and necessary changes harder to achieve.

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⁴The spoof memes were collected and discussed in blog posts such as that of Felton(2020), the title of which (The Coronavirus Meme About ‘Nature Is Healing’ Is So Damn Funny) backs up our point.

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