

## **A Pragmatic Analysis of English Lecturers' Interpretation of Implicatures in Smudge the Cat Memes**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Internet memes have become the object of numerous studies over the years. Memes often contain implicatures or additional implied meaning, especially when they flout or violate some conversational maxims. This implied meaning can sometimes be difficult to interpret which may lead to misunderstanding the meme itself. Therefore, this study aims to examine what kinds of maxims are flouted and what is the implicature behind the internet memes. Additionally, this research explores how English lecturers in a private university in North Jakarta interpret the implicature of the memes under study. A total of 5 memes are used in this research, all of which are Smudge the Cat memes collected from a Facebook group dedicated to posting various memes of this popular white cat. The data is analyzed qualitatively since it does not involve any numerical calculations. To collect the data for the lecturers' interpretation of the memes, an online questionnaire was distributed via Google Form. The findings reveal that the main maxim that is violated in the memes is the maxim of manner as most of the replies in the memes can be said to be ambiguous. The implicature behind the memes vary depending on the meme itself, and some of the lecturers had difficulty identifying the additional implied meaning of the memes.

**Keywords:** implicature; flouting maxims; memes; interpretation

## INTRODUCTION

Internet memes have become the object of numerous studies over the years since they are commonly used in various digital platforms. Memes can be used to portray many different kinds of topics such as student life (Sekarsari & Wijayanto, 2024), distant learning (Malik & Zahra, 2022), Covid-19 (Romadhon & Muslim, 2020), gender representation (Nugroho, 2024), or even specific topics like THR or Eid allowance (Siah et al., 2023). One popular type of meme is humorous memes as they are often used as a source of entertainment. Several studies have been conducted which focus on this kind of meme such as the one by Joshua (2020) and Vasquez & Aslan (2021). Another aspect of memes that have been investigated by previous researchers is implicature (Hamza & Yunus, 2022; Rina et al., 2020; Umamah et al. 2023). Implicature can be understood as the additional implied meaning behind an utterance. Memes often contain implicatures since the message that is conveyed in memes are not always explicit, including memes which are humorous in nature.

Although many memes contain implicature, it can be difficult to properly interpret the hidden meaning, which may lead to misunderstanding the meme. For instance, the result of Nugroho's & Liemantara's (2024) research revealed that EFL undergraduate students had trouble understanding the implicature in memes dealing with gender representation. Additionally, it may even be more difficult for conversational implicatures where the implied meaning is the result of the violation or flouting of Grice's cooperative principle maxims. In other words, because one of the speakers in a conversation flouts the maxims, the hidden additional meaning behind the humorous meme which contains the joke may become difficult to comprehend, which then leads to the misunderstanding of the joke.

From this background, the researchers have become interested in further exploring how humorous memes make use of the flouting of Grice's maxims to create the implied jokes or implicatures. Furthermore, this research aims to investigate how Indonesians interpret the implicature in these memes. Even though several studies have investigated this topic, not many have specifically examined how English lecturers in Jakarta (Indonesian lecturers teaching English) are able to interpret the hidden additional meaning in humorous memes; more specifically, Smudge the cat memes. Therefore, the researchers propose the following research questions for this study:

1. What kind of maxims are flouted in the memes?
2. What is the implicature behind the memes?
3. How do the English lecturers interpret the implicature in the memes?

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design since the data is analyzed without using any specific formulas and calculations. The main source of data is taken from the memes and the result of the questionnaire that is distributed to the respondents. The questionnaire contains 6 internet memes, which are all Smudge the cat memes. Smudge the cat is a popular meme that is often found on the internet. It mostly involves the image of Smudge the white cat sitting in a restaurant accompanied by the image of a woman yelling and pointing a finger at Smudge. There are other variations where Smudge is accompanied by other cats, a judge, police officers, and several others. Considering that there are numerous Smudge the cat memes, this study utilizes a purposive random sampling technique to select the memes. All of the memes are taken from a Facebook group dedicated to posting memes of Smudge the cat. The 6 memes used in this study are all taken from the month of May, and only memes which contain conversational implicatures are selected. For each of the 6 memes, there are 2 items that the respondents must answer. The first is a multiple choices questions asking about their interpretation of the implicature in the memes, namely "Which of the following statement best describes the implicit meaning of this meme?" The second item is a statement that examines their perception of the memes, whether they were difficult to understand or not. More specifically, the statement is "I can easily understand the implicit meaning behind the meme" in which they have to respond by selecting one answer from a Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. As for the respondents, they are all lecturers from the English Department at a private university in North Jakarta. A total of 17 lecturers have participated in this study. The questionnaire was distributed to them via Google Form.

After all of the data has been collected, the researchers analyzed the data in accordance with the three research questions proposed in this study. First of all, the memes are analyzed in terms of the maxims that are violated. Next, the implicature behind the memes are also analyzed. Lastly, the result of the questionnaire is examined

more closely to find out the respondents' interpretations and perceptions of the implicature in the memes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

The 6 memes under study are analyzed and presented together with the result of the questionnaire. More specifically, each meme is analyzed in terms of the maxims that are violated or flouted, their implicature or implied hidden meaning, and the result of the questionnaire filled by the respondents or the English lecturers.

#### Meme 1

Picture 1:  
Image of Meme 1



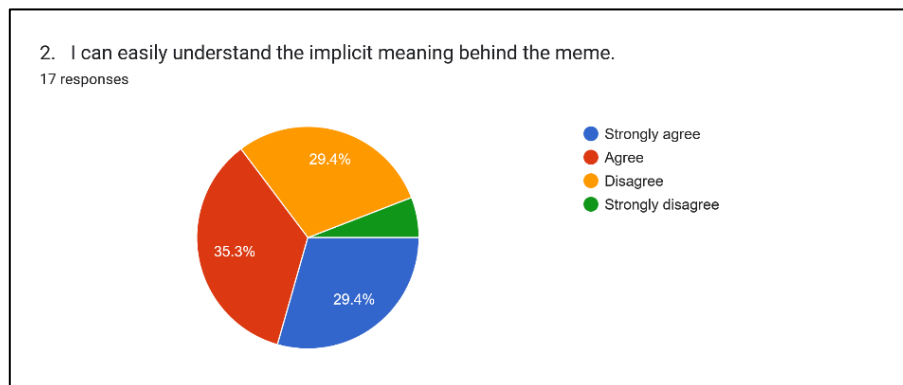
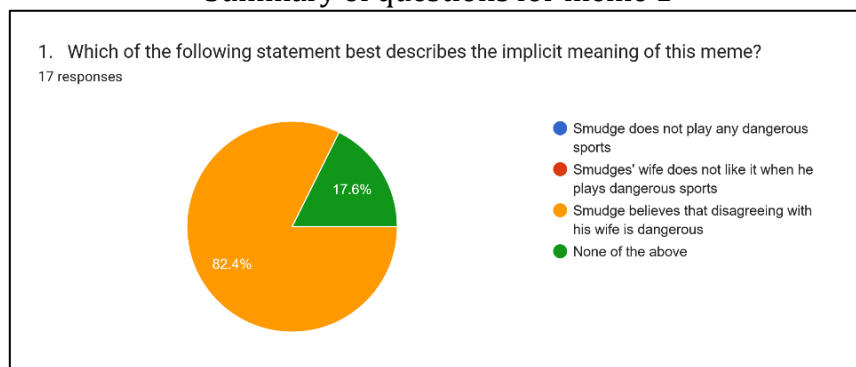
First of all, in terms of the maxim that is violated in the meme above, it can be said that Smudge is violating the maxim of quantity since the reply that Smudge gave is not informative enough. Smudge was asked whether he plays any dangerous sports and he replies by saying "I sometimes disagree with my wife." This response does not properly answer the question or does not provide the necessary information. The proper response should have been either a "Yes, I do" or "No, I don't".

Next, it can be concluded that the implicature behind this meme is along the line of 'disagreeing with Smudge's wife is considered as dangerous'. In other words, even though it may seem

like Smudge is not directly answering the question properly, he is actually indeed answering the question but implicitly by mentioning his wife.

As for the result of the questionnaire, the summary of the respondents' answers can be seen below.

Picture 2:  
Summary of questions for meme 1



Out of the 17 respondents, 14 (82.4 %) of them answered "Smudge believes that disagreeing with his wife is dangerous". Only 3 (17.6%) answered "none of the above". This shows that most of them agreed that the implicature in this meme is concerned with the danger of disagreeing with Smudge's wife. Only very few thought that none of the selections accurately reflected the implied meaning or implicature. In terms of the respondents' perceptions of this particular meme, they have quite different points of view. Some of

them found the meme to be easy to understand, while others felt that it was quite hard.

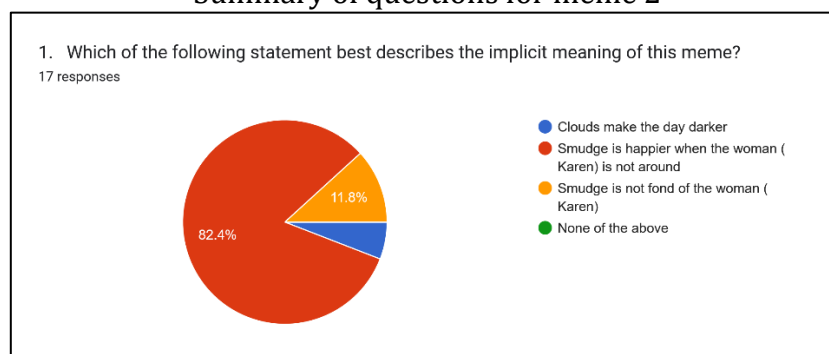
## Meme 2

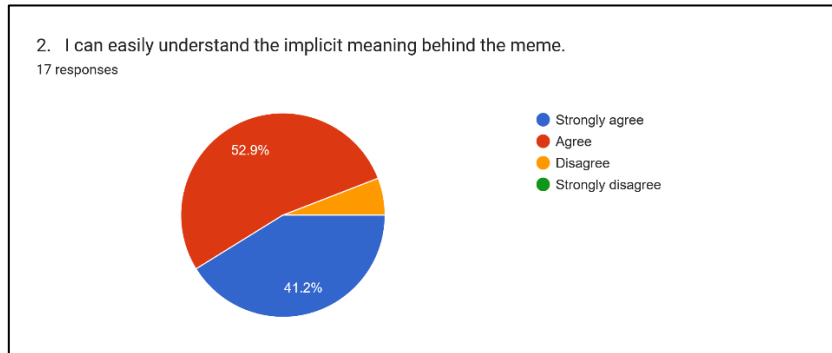
Picture 3:  
Image of Meme 2



From Picture 3 above, it can be deduced that the maxim that is violated is the maxim of manner because Smudge's reply is somewhat ambiguous or unclear. Smudge should have provided a clearer reason as to why the woman reminds him of clouds. However, from this reply it can be deduced that the implicature is "Smudge is happier when the woman is not around" because whenever the woman is not there, his day becomes brighter which is associated with being happy.

Picture 4:  
Summary of questions for meme 2





Similar to before, picture 4 above shows that 14 (82.4%) believes that the implicature is in line with the interpretation of the researchers. Only very few had different opinions. As for their perception of the meme itself, most of them either agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to understand this meme. Only 1 person disagreed or thought that it was difficult to understand.

### Meme 3

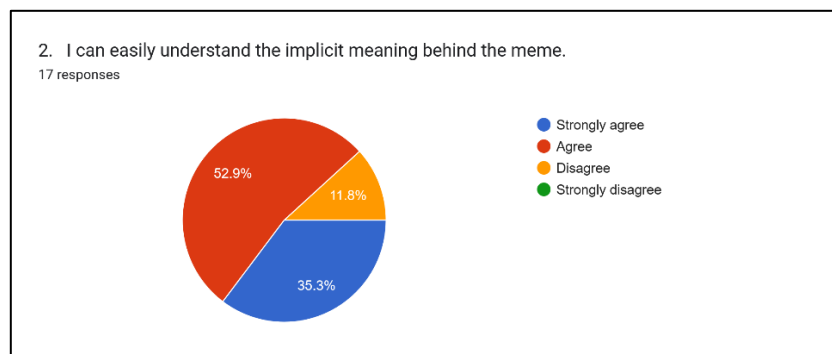
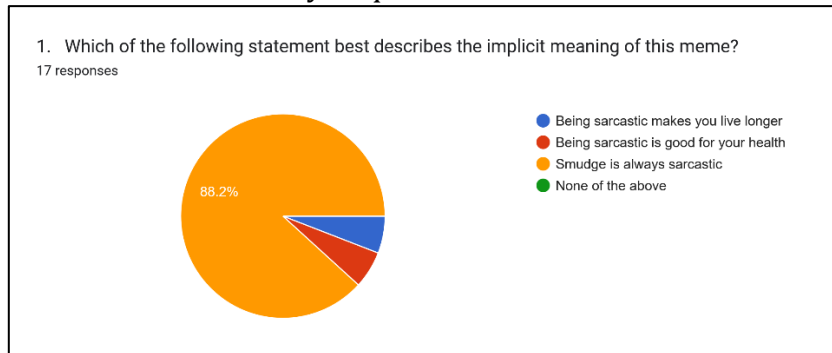
Picture 5:  
Image of Meme 3



From picture 5 above, we can see that the maxim that is being flouted by Smudge is the maxim of manner since his response is not very clear. Smudge suddenly says that he is going to live forever even though the other cat mainly talks about being sarcastic. Based on this, it can assumed that Smudge is always sarcastic since being sarcastic

on a regular basis can extend someone's life up to 3 years, and since he is sarcastic all the time, then he will live forever following this logic.

Picture 6:  
Summary of questions for meme 3



Based on the data in Picture 6, most of the respondents, namely 15 (88.2%) interpreted this meme similarly to the researchers. Only very few had different opinions. In terms of their perceptions, most of them also thought that this meme was relatively easy to understand. Only 2 (11.8%) thought that it was not that easy to comprehend the implicature in this meme.



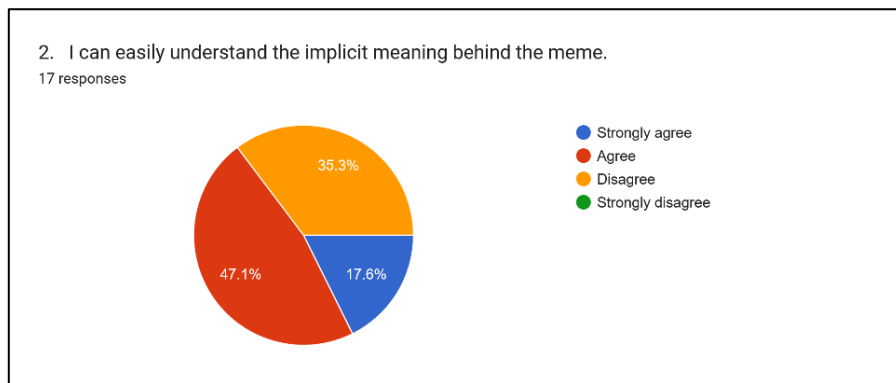
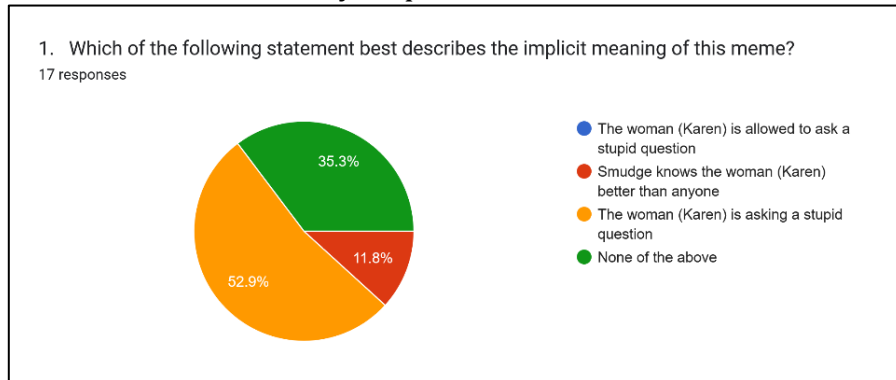
#### Meme 4

Picture 7:  
Image of Meme 4



Picture 7 above shows that the maxim that is violated is also the maxim of manner since Smudge's reply is not very obvious or clear. It can also be said that it is violating the maxim of quantity since he should have answered the woman's question with an answer like "Sure" or "Go ahead". In other words, the information is not sufficient with regard to that particular question. But from this, it can be concluded that the implicature is that woman always asks stupid question, that is why Smudge replies like that.

Picture 8:  
Summary of questions for meme 4



As for the respondents' answers regarding the implicit meaning behind the meme, their responses were quite varied. Around half of them, namely 9 (52.9%) are of the opinion that the woman is asking a stupid question. This is somewhat different from the researchers' point of view. The answer that is more in line with the researchers' answer is actually "None of the above" and only 6 (35.3%) of them selected this as their response. There are also quite a few who found this meme quite difficult to interpret (6 or 35.3% of them) which is understandable as Smudge's answer is quite ambiguous.

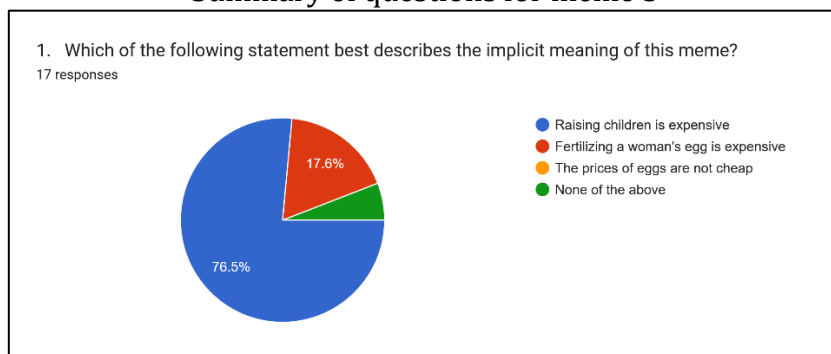
## Meme 5

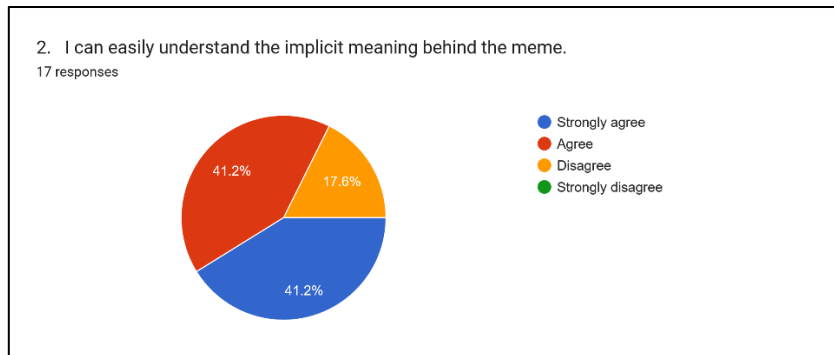
Picture 9:  
Image of Meme 5



The maxim that is flouted from Picture 9 above is also the maxim of manner. Smudge's response is somewhat unclear even though it is quite long. It can also be said that it is violating the maxim of quantity since he seems to provide too much information as a response to a simple statement regarding the prices of eggs. This implies that Smudge is actually talking about a different kind of egg, namely the ones in a woman and when you fertilize it, you will get her pregnant and eventually have children, which can be said to be expensive.

Picture 10:  
Summary of questions for meme 5





From Picture 10 above, it can be seen that most of the respondents or 13 (76.5%) out of the 17 have a similar idea as the researchers where the implied meaning of the meme deals with the costliness of raising children. Only a few of them have different perspectives. As for the difficulty of interpreting the meme, only 3 (17.6%) found it quite challenging while the rest thought it was not too hard to interpret the implied meaning of the meme.

## Meme 6

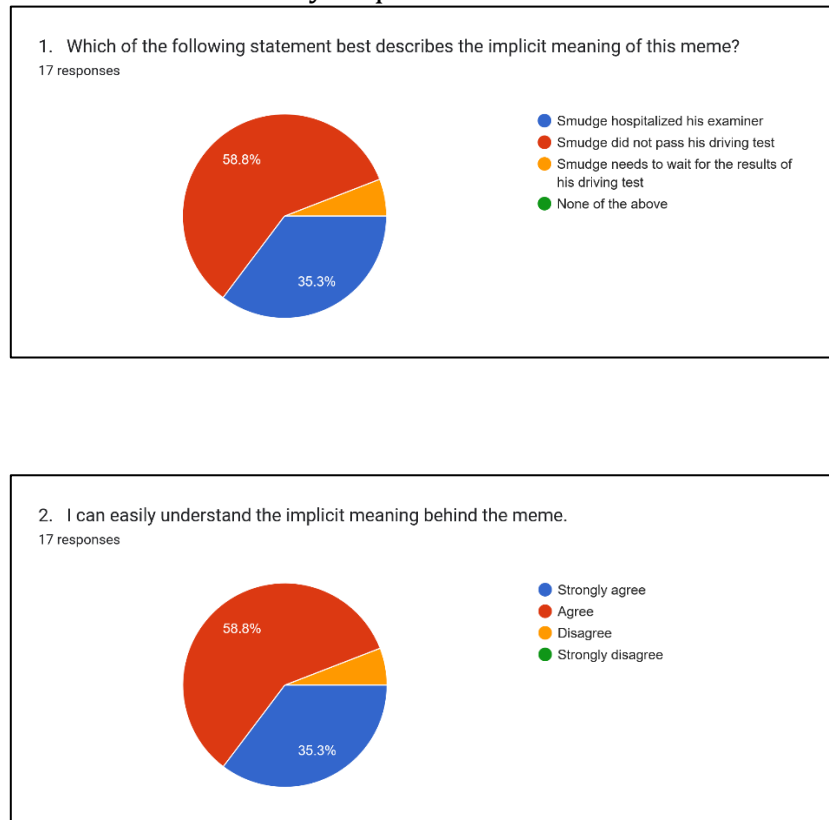
Picture 11:  
Image of Meme 6



Based on Picture 11 above, it can be seen that the maxim of manner is again being violated as the answer is not very clear or ambiguous. Smudge should have replied with a simple yes or no to the woman's question. Additionally, the maxim of quantity is also being flouted since the response is not informative enough. From this, the researchers concluded that the implicature is that Smudge did not pass the driving test since he hurt the examiner during the test, which

means that he most likely crashed; hence, why he did not pass the test.

Picture 12:  
Summary of questions for meme 6



Picture 12 above shows that more than half of the respondents (10 or 58.8%) also think that the implicature is that Smudge did not pass his driving test. 6 (35.3%) of them chose “Smudge hospitalized his examiner” as their answer which can also be considered as an implied meaning for this meme, but the researchers feel that the main implied meaning of the whole meme is still “Smudge did not pass his driving test” since that is related to the woman’s question while the previous answer is not. Lastly, most of the respondents found this meme to be quite easy to understand, even though some of them ended up choosing an answer that may not have been the best answer.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of the current study, it is found that there are two maxims that are violated in the 6 Smudge the cat memes, namely the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. The one that

is mostly violated is the latter. This is because most of the response from Smudge is ambiguous, and this ambiguity is supposedly the main source of the humor in these memes. If Smudge did not violate this maxim, the meme would most likely not be funny.

In terms of the implicature for the memes, they are quite different for each meme since they talk about very different things. For example, the first meme is about dangerous sports while meme 2 is about Smudge's opinion of feelings of the woman. However, in order to understand the implicature of each meme, we must definitely be able to interpret beyond the literal meaning of utterances and read between the lines.

Lastly, with regards to the lecturers' interpretation of the memes, it is found that for most memes, the lecturers have similar opinions with the researchers. However, it should be noted that there are some memes that the lecturers considered to be somewhat difficult to understand. Perhaps because the maxim of manner is violated and the response is quite ambiguous. This is in line with the findings of Nugroho's (2024) study which revealed that memes can indeed be confusing for Indonesians. Although, it should be noted that the respondents of the previous study are students and the current ones are lecturers. Seeing as even lecturers find some memes to be difficult to comprehend, it is no surprise that students would find meme problematic as well.

## CONCLUSION

There are several conclusions that can be taken from the current study. First of all, with regard to the violation of maxims in memes, it is found that for the 6 memes under study, the main maxim that is violated is the maxim of manner which in the end created the humor in the memes. Second, the implicature in the memes can only be properly understood if we try to understand what is not explicitly stated. In other words, we cannot just comprehend the utterances literally, but we must go beyond that and use some logic to deduce the real hidden meaning. Lastly, the respondents of the current study which are English lecturers were mostly able to properly comprehend the implicatures behind the memes, even though some of them claimed that they had trouble understanding the implicit meaning in the memes.

Finally, the researchers realize that this study is limited in various aspects. For instance, it is limited to only analyzing 6 specific

memes. Future studies can try to investigate a larger number of memes to have a richer and more comprehensive result. The implicature in the memes is also only analyzed in terms of the maxims that are violated. Perhaps future research can explore other aspects. Lastly, since memes contain implicature, it is suggested that memes can be used as teaching materials, especially to teach implicatures. Just as the findings of Rerung's (2021) study has shown that online materials can facilitate language learning, especially for EFL learners, perhaps it would be possible for future studies to explore the effectiveness of using memes to help improve students' ability to comprehend implicatures.

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