

# Humour in times of mourning? A contrastive analysis of memes

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the use of humorous memes in times of mourning from a contrastive English-Spanish perspective. The study of the discourse of death and grief is receiving increasing attention mainly due to the changes brought about by the migration of mourning practices to the internet. Previous research has revealed that mourning personal losses or those of public figures is not exempt from including negative evaluations of the deceased or the circumstances surrounding them. Despite the identification of ideological discourses around death, to our knowledge, no attention has been paid to the use of humour in times of mourning, especially from a contrastive perspective. The present study aims to begin to fill this gap through the analysis of humorous memes published following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. We pose a distinction between two uses of humour in times of mourning, laughing while mourning and laughing at mourning, and argue that humorous memes in our study fall within the second category. Two corpora of humorous memes in Spanish (n = 60) and English (n = 67) were compiled and analysed using a mixed methods approach within a pragmatics perspective. The contrastive analysis identified (i) the underlying ideologies in terms of intentions and attitudes, (ii) the expectations of mutuality of information, (iii) the humorous strategies devised, (iv) and the elements characteristic of the discourse of mourning. Findings show that online posters were not actually in mourning, and that they combined the discourses of mourning, humour, and criticism with different intentions within and across the two languages under scrutiny. Our study suggests changes in mourning etiquette in the public sphere and concludes that laughing at mourning was the type of humour in times of mourning that prevailed in our data.*

*Keywords: humour, mourning, memes, multimodality, social media.*

## **1. Introduction**

Mourning online has become one of the most prevalent digitally mediated social practices in today's post-digital society. Mourning the loss of a loved one, the loss of a pet and, especially, mourning associated with significant events like the death of a revered public figure or with mass casualties due to terrorism, natural disasters or school shootings have become common practices on social media. Deaths related to notable events trigger “mass outpourings of condolences” on the internet (Zhoe & Jurgens, 2020, p. 611) and are the object of increasing scholarly attention from various social science and humanities disciplines (Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018). However, as we will see, not all social media reactions to significant deaths contain expressions of sympathy.

This paper aims to investigate the interconnection between the discourses of mourning and humour on social media. To do so, it examines a corpus of Spanish and English memes in posts published as reactions to the passing away of a prominent public figure: Queen Elizabeth II. Although scholarly interest in social media mourning is growing, to our knowledge studies focusing specifically on the interface between the discourses of death and humour are in short supply (Wilson et al., 2023). Additionally, contrastive pragmatic studies in English and Spanish, are scarce in the fields of mourning and humour (but see, among others, Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024 for studies on mourning, and Zhu, 2019 for studies on humour). Our study poses a distinction between two uses of humour in times of mourning, namely, laughing *while* mourning and laughing *at* mourning, and we would like to argue that humorous memes in our data fall within the second category.

In order to address our objective, two comparable corpora of memes in English and Spanish were compiled from social media. A mixed methods approach to the data was adopted, which involved a contrastive pragmatic analysis of the ideology underlying mourning-related humorous memes, the predicted mutuality of information, the strategies devised for the successful interpretation of the memes and the subsequent derivation of humorous effects, together with the mourning strategies employed therein.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews extant research on social media mourning with a view to identifying the main features of the discourse of death and loss and relating it to studies of humour, particularly as expressed through memes. After posing the research questions that guide the present study, in Section 3 the methodological details are provided in relation to the data, the analytical frameworks and procedure and the ethical measures adopted in storing and analysing digital data. Section 4 presents and discusses the results of the four-pronged analysis, with examples from our corpora, and the final section addresses the research questions and draws some concluding remarks.

## **2. Mourning and humour**

Mourning, or the public display of grieving in relation to death and loss (Giaxoglou, 2014, p. 12), involves important social practices, crucially emotional (Giaxoglou, 2021; Martín-Cortés et al., 2022, p. 2), which are subject to cultural, religious and/or custom-related norms (Hensley & Clayton, 2008, p. 152). The prevalence of mourning practices in social life, their variety and changing nature and, especially, their increasing presence on social media (Akhther & Tetteh, 2023; Wagner, 2018), are behind the many recent studies on mourning across disciplines.

Over the last fifteen years, research has shown how online mourning practices have expanded traditional practices on temporal, spatial, social and cultural levels (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011, p. 152; Wagner, 2018, p. 2), embraced a diversity of rituals, like reminiscing, offering condolences or memorialising, and employed multimodal resources, like emoji,

hashtags, GIFs or memes (e.g., Akhter & Tetter, 2023; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024).

Different studies of collective yet intimate online mourning have scrutinised a number of social practices on different platforms, ranging from the active social media profiles of decedents on MySpace or Facebook (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Giaxoglou, 2014, 2015, 2021) and collective memorial sites (McGlashan, 2021) to closed Facebook groups, which help mourners remember the deceased and offer in-group support (Martín-Cortés et al., 2022, but see Page, 2018). Online mourning practices include acts of affective positioning that allow posters to curb closeness and distance with death and the dead, as well as acts of stance-taking that can convey sociopolitical and cultural meanings (e.g. Giaxoglou, 2021).

Parasocial mourning – or mourning for the loss of people with whom the mourner had no personal connection – has recently emerged as a significant socio-technological contemporary practice, which is of special relevance to the present paper. In a computational analysis of a sizeable corpus of condolences from Reddit, Zoe and Jurgen (2020) found that expressions of condolences were offered to posters suffering from the death of a closed one less frequently than to those experiencing the loss of a pet. In contrast, “spikes in condolence” were caused by significant events like mass casualties, “school shootings and celebrity deaths” (p. 611). Cases of this type of parasocial mourning have been the object of discursive research, especially on X (formerly, Twitter). For instance, the studies of reactions to the Paris attack of 2015 in posts using #JeSuisCharlie (e.g. de Cock & Pedraza, 2018; Giaxoglou, 2021; Johansson et al., 2018) and those focusing on posts with the hashtag #JeSuiAylan, following the death of the migrant child Alan Kurdi (Giaxoglou, 2021; Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2020), are a case in point. These studies focused on the use of hashtags as powerful tools for expressing solidarity and empathy – a key component of condolences (Elwood, 2004, among others) – either towards the victims of attacks or the refugee crisis. In all cases, posters also engaged in political and social commentary.

The present paper specifically addresses the parasocial mourning of a high-profile public figure. In this case, mourners must put an end to a one-way relationship in which they are emotionally invested and which, importantly, though symbolically, causes feelings similar to those experienced when losing a personal social contact (Akhter & Tetteh, 2023, p. 130; DeGroot & Leith, 2015). Social media are argued to offer a space to cope with death and the possibility to join a virtual community of likeminded online mourners (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Parasocial online mourners have been reported to go through the well-known five stages of grief identified by Kubler-Ross (1969) - namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – despite the criticism this model has received (e.g. Avis et al., 2021). In their study of reactions to the sudden death of Michael Jackson on TMZ, former Twitter and Facebook, Sanderson & Cheon (2010) found grieving comments related to all five stages, with posts of acceptance as the most prominent across platforms. Van der Bulck and Larsson’s (2019) study of Twitter reactions to the death of David Bowie also found frequent acceptance posts, but no comments related to denial or bargaining. In their grieving, parasocial mourners, like social mourners, employed several coping mechanisms such as online individualised tributes, reminiscing, memorialising and recognising the deceased’s good deeds, e.g., advocacy (Akhter & Tetteh, 2023; van der Bulck & Larsson, 2019), as well as expressions aimed at comforting the bereaved (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024). Coping mechanisms like

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<sup>1</sup> Further studies of parasocial mourning online have examined reactions to the deaths of pop music icons Michael Jackson (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010), David Bowie (van der Bulck & Larsson, 2019) or Amy Winehouse (Lansdall-Welfare et al., 2012), actor Robin Williams (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016), Apple founder Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013), physicist Stephen Hawking (Akhter & Tetteh, 2023) or football player Diego Armando Maradona (Bou-Franch, 2023), among others.

expressions of admiration and worship, sometimes with a religious overtone, were also used (Bou-Franch, 2023; DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Sanderson & Cheon, 2010). Among the discursive resources, euphemistic metaphors and the creative use of technology-afforded visuals such as pictures, GIFs, emojis or laudatory memes were also employed to commemorate the decedent (Bou-Franch, 2023; van den Bulck & Larsson 2019).

In sum, grieving has been found to involve the expression of several emotions, crucially, sympathy, but also sadness, longing, love and affection, confusion or shock and disbelief (Akhther & Tetteh, 2023; Bou-Franch, 2023; van den Bulck & Larsson, 2017; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). An interesting yet under-researched aspect of online mourning refers to the expression of negative evaluations and emotions towards the deceased. In her study of reactions to the death of football player Diego Armando Maradona, Bou-Franch (2023) found that negative reactions, although less frequent than positive comments, occurred significantly as posters criticised the decedent himself, his mourners, and the sociopolitical situation of their country of origin. Van den Bulck & Larsson (2017), however, found an insignificant number of expressions of hatred, which were mainly directed against Davie Bowie's illness. In her interactional study of Facebook groups following the deaths of Nelson Mandela and Margaret Thatcher, Page (2018) found that in sharing stories, ambiguous representations of the deceased could promote bonding and affiliation or disaffiliation in polarising terms. Additionally, de Cock & Pedraza's (2018) study of tweets related to the Paris attack also found some negative comments. These showed that the "JeSuis" hashtags proliferated and evolved, mocking certain causes or even the use of the hashtag itself, thus revealing processes of disidentification and disaffiliation. Additionally, in their contrastive pragmatic study of the expression of condolences in Spanish and English, the two languages also under scrutiny in this article, Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2024) found that condolence posts often included ideological claims related to social injustice (see also Bou-Franch, 2023, de Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018; Giaxoglou, 2021; or Quintana & Kailuweit, 2017). What is more, the few studies dealing with reactions to the death of Queen Elizabeth II – like the present study – found that protests in the streets and negative comments on social media countered the socially sanctioned, mainstream media narrative of nostalgia and devotion to the royal decedent (Hallgren, 2024; Sumiala et al., 2025).

Interestingly, even though extant discourse research has focused on affiliative and, to a lesser extent, disaffiliative discourses surrounding the passing of public figures (see also Clancy, 2024 or Scheinfeld et al., 2024), studies of post-death bereavement humour are scarce, to our knowledge, and in need of further attention (Wilson et al., 2023). Bereavement humour is not always present in mourning (e.g. Taylor et al., 2010) and perceptions of appropriateness associated with this type of humour are subject to sociocultural variation (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014; Lund et al., 2009). Even so, the use of humour while mourning is promoted in positive psychology to defuse the tensions caused by grief (Nevado & González, 2017) and is important for bereaved people to "reduce anxiety and depression, and also the physical, social, emotional, or mental sequelae of impactful long-term bereavement grief" (Wilson et al., 2023, p. 1640). It must be noted, however, that in the context of online mourning, some humour, sarcasm, and ambiguous messages can trigger negative responses (e.g., de Cock & Pedraza, 2018; Page, 2018) and may suggest that such user-generated messages were not published by bereaved posters. In this sense, we propose a distinction between two uses of humour in times of mourning, namely, laughing *while* mourning and laughing *at* mourning. One of the goals of our study is to identify the type of humour in mourning that prevails in our data.

In sum, studies of humour in mourning are scarce and especially lacking within contrastive pragmatics research. Our study, thus, aims to begin to fill this gap by focusing on humorous memes in English and Spanish, related to the death of a public figure, namely, Queen Elizabeth II. The research questions that guided this study are:

RQ1. *Meme ideology*. What is the ideology underlying humorous memes in terms of intentions and attitudes?

RQ2. *Mutuality of information*. What contextual assumptions were necessary for the successful interpretation of memes?

RQ3. *Humour*. What humorous strategies were employed?

RQ4. *Mourning*. What means and strategies of mourning and condoling were found in the memes?

Further, we aim to relate our findings to the two contexts of mourning and humour proposed above.

### **3. Methodology**

To address our objective, two *ad hoc* corpora of 127 (comments containing) humorous memes triggered by the death of Queen Elizabeth II on 8 September 2022 were compiled in Spanish ( $n = 60$ ) and English ( $n = 67$ ), to allow for a contrastive analysis. Memes are understood to refer to “an idea, video extract, catchphrase, textual witty message or photo that is shared through social media; and functions as an effective way to connect with an audience, collect ideas, share emotions, and actions in an easily transferable manner” (Kereviciene, 2023, p. 77). To compile the Spanish corpus, a Google search for humorous memes in relation to the death of Queen Elizabeth II was carried out. The top hits were news stories from mainstream media that had recontextualised humorous memes from the social network X and presented them as the “best” or “funniest” posts (Rosero Moreno, 2022; El País, 2022; Redacción, 2022; Público, 2022; El Periódico, 2022). The memes in the stories and their accompanying comments, when provided, were extracted for our corpus. The English corpus was differently compiled, as a Google search showed no mainstream media reporting on humorous memes about the passing of the Queen. The English memes were compiled from the top hits that the Google search yielded, which included a variety of sites with posts from Reddit, Pinterest, and blogs and magazines that recontextualised humorous memes, mainly from X (Piñata Farms, 2022; Pinterest, n.d.; Reddit, n.d.; Ruth, 2022; Zachnading, n.d.; Zarrelli, 2022). After a preliminary analysis, all the memes that were repeated or written in a language different from the two under scrutiny in this study were discarded. The final corpora for analysis contained 116 memes, in Spanish ( $n = 52$ ) and English ( $n = 64$ ). Although some memes in the corpora contained only text or image, they mostly combined both, visual and textual modes, to communicate meaning. As shown in Table 1, both corpora exhibit a preference for memes combining text and image (76.93 per cent in the Spanish corpus; 91.19 per cent in the English corpus). This preference is not gratuitous but results from the meme creators’ awareness of the possibilities that multimodal discourse offers for the generation of humour, especially when the intended interpretation cannot be obtained from the partial meanings of text or image taken separately, but only from the combination of both. Said multimodal combination has proved effective in various kinds of meme-related humour (e.g., Yus, 2024).

Table 1. Features of the corpora for analysis

SPANISH		ENGLISH	
<b>CORPORA</b>	Initial corpus:	60	Initial corpus: 67
	Dismissed:	8	Dismissed: 3
	Final corpus	52	Final corpus 64
<b>MODES</b>	Text:	9 (17.3%)	Text: 4 (6.25%)
	Image:	3 (5.77%)	Image: 1 (1.56%)
	Text-image:	40 (76.93%)	Text-image: 59 (91.19%)

In fact, many of the memes in our corpora require the combination of the partial interpretations of the text and the image for successful comprehension. Previous research has addressed the pragmatic implications of processing combinations of text and image in relevance-theoretic terms (Yus, 2016, 2019), which are of consequence in the analysis of our data. Memes in which the text is placed on the image force a reinterpretation – often through a process of *metaphorisation* - of the default referent of said images. This is the case of the meme from our English corpus reproduced in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Meme that needs multimodality for comprehension

In relation to the memes in our corpora, it is important to note that they were created and published during the state-driven media coverage of the royal funeral, which lasted over 10 days and was followed by billions of viewers across the world. This popular *media event* also triggered a *viral event* that countered the sanctioned, staged narrative of praise and nostalgia both in the streets and on social media, especially on #Irish and #BlackX, by developing challenging, critical-history narratives of protest (Hallgren, 2024; Sumiala et al., 2025). This suggests that the memes in our study may also contain ideological discourses of affiliation and disaffiliation (cf. Page, 2018) with the crown.

The memes in the corpora were published in several public internet domains, which means content is open and visible to anyone and can be searched freely (e.g., Lutzky & Kehoe, 2022). Consequently, the data sets used in this study were exempt from institutional approval. Nonetheless, this study follows standard practice among digital scholars (Page et al., 2014;

Pihlaja, 2022; Tagg & Spilioti, 2022) and complies with the Association of Internet Researchers' ethical recommendations for best practices (Franzke et al., 2020) in that the corpora were anonymised to avoid identification of the meme creators and/or the posters that shared them in their feeds.

A mixed methods approach to the data was adopted, which involved both a qualitative, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a quantitative analysis of all the memes in our data. Numbers were provided in the belief that they would facilitate implementing our contrastive pragmatic scrutiny. The analytical process was bottom-up as well as informed by previous studies. The analytical procedure involved several steps designed to address the four research questions:

1. *Ideology: intentions and attitudes.* Our analysis started by examining the ideological positioning (van Dijk, 1998, 2006) of the memes in our corpora (RQ1). We follow van Dijk's (2006, p. 116) view of ideology as comprising socially shared sets of beliefs and values that are articulated in discourse. Hence, the analysis of ideological positioning was done in two stages. Firstly, the underlying intention of the meme creator or user (that shared the meme) was identified in terms of whether the publication contained one of the following:

- (1) an expression of mourning or condolence,
- (2) criticism of a person or event; or
- (3) humour for the sake of humour, that is, a mourning-related meme for the sole sake of generating humorous effects.

Secondly, the expectations about the audience's background beliefs and attitudes towards the monarchy were investigated. All the memes in our corpora were classified as either (i) pro-monarchy, (ii) anti-monarchy, or (iii) neutral / irrelevant. The different intentions and attitudes were coded and computed.

2. *Mutuality of information.* The next step was devoted to identifying the expectations of mutuality of information between the meme creator and their potential audience (RQ2). This involved the identification of the contextual assumptions or implicated premises (Sperber & Wilson 1995; Yus, 2011) necessary for the successful interpretation of the memes. As claimed in Yus (2016), the way in which the mutuality of these assumptions is revealed through a proper inferential outcome may itself generate an offset of non-propositional effects (feelings, emotions) and constitute the major source of humour (in memes, in the case of this study).

3. *Humorous strategies.* The third step included the identification, coding, and computation of the main comprehension strategies devised by the meme creator for humorous purposes (RQ3). The analysis of comprehension strategies for humour draws from Yus' (2013, 2016) Intersecting Circles Model, which was originally developed to account for the comprehension of humour in jokes from a relevance-theoretic perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Yus, 2011). According to this model, the strategies underlying humorous discourse can be schematically arranged as three intersecting circles which are explained as follows:

The *first circle* or *make-sense frame* applies to jokes whose main purpose is to alter the hearer's inference while building up a suitable mental situation for the comprehension of the joke, often in a sub-attentive way. The setup of many jokes acts as a situation-building context that is subsequently invalidated, thus generating incongruity and humorous effects.

The *second circle* is labelled *cultural frame* and includes jokes that provide access to background information regarding society and culture, often in the shape of stereotypes of sex roles, professions, or ethnic origins, among others. This circle also includes culture-specific

background information, that is, expected mutuality of information about specific cultural events or people.

The *third circle* covers the actual *joke text interpretation*. Joke creators often predict and manipulate the inferential strategies that the addressee will invariably perform in order to reach the proper interpretation of the utterance, so that humorous effects may be derived from this manipulation. Alterations in these predicted inferential patterns for joke comprehension include playing with polysemy, literal vs. metaphoric meanings, the assignment of referents for indexicals or the retrieval of unarticulated constituents, among other inferential strategies. Meme discourse interpretation also includes the derivation of implicatures, since meme creators expect their audience to be able to retrieve from context the necessary contextual assumptions (*implicated premises*) that allow for the derivation of implicatures (*implicated conclusions*).

4. *Mourning*. The last step in our analysis was concerned with the identification of multimodal discursive patterns of mourning in memes. The main patterns involved multimodal references to death and mourning as well as pragmalinguistic strategies of online condolences and grief in Spanish and English, as identified by previous research (see Section 3). For instance, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2024) contrastive study of this type of online condolences was especially helpful in the analysis as it identified pragmalinguistic strategies in the languages of interest here. In their study, the three most frequent strategies were (i) acknowledgement of death, (ii) appreciation for the deceased, and (iii) comforting the bereaved. These were taken into consideration in our analysis alongside other, related, forms of mourning and condoling like posting individualised tributes, reminiscing, or memorialising (Akhther & Tetteh, 2023; van der Bulck & Larsson, 2019). Additionally, religious statements were also considered as they have come up in prior research (Bou-Franch, 2023; DeGroot & Leith, 2015; Sanderson & Cheon, 2010).

## **4. Humorous memes in times of mourning: Analysis**

The main objective of this study is to examine the humorous memes published in times of mourning; to this end, four research questions were posed and a four-pronged analysis designed in the methodology section. This section deals with that analysis in detail by providing the results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses and illustrating the different categories. It consists of subsections on ideology, mutuality of information, humorous strategies, and mourning strategies.

### **4.1. Ideology: Intentions and attitudes**

The ideology behind the memes in our corpora was considered in terms of the intention of the meme creator/user alongside their expectations of the audience's attitudes and beliefs about Queen Elizabeth II and, more generally, the monarchy.

Table 2. Meme ideology in terms of intentions and attitudes

	SPANISH CORPUS (n = 52)	N	%	ENGLISH CORPUS (n = 64)	N	%
<i>Intention of meme creator / user</i>	Mourning	5	9.61	Mourning	3	4.68
	Criticism	24	46.15	Criticism	22	34.38
	Humour	23	44.24	Humour	39	60.94
<i>Expectations of audience's attitudes and beliefs about QEII (and monarchy)</i>	Pro-monarchy	10	19.3	Pro-monarchy	6	9.37
	Anti-monarchy	16	30.7	Anti-monarchy	28	43.76
	Neutral	26	50	Neutral	30	46.87

The analysis of the intentions of the memes' creators – or the posters that shared them – revealed that the most frequent intentions were humorous and critical in both languages. In the Spanish corpus, both intentions were equally prominent whereas in the English corpus, the humorous intent was twice as frequent as the critical opinion. English memes used humour as an excuse to convey critical opinions towards the British monarchy and specifically the Queen, as its main symbol. Although some Spanish memes were also critical of the British monarchy, the targets of criticism were mainly public figures like politicians and members of the Spanish monarchy. Interestingly, *bona fide* expressions of mourning and condolence were the least frequent in both corpora, although slightly more frequent in Spanish than English.

Regarding the memes' ideological positioning, the audience's expectations of the attitudes and beliefs about the Queen and the monarchy were explored next. Most humorous memes showed neutral or indeterminate expectations about the monarchy in both languages (see meme on the left in Figure 2), with anti-monarchy expectations as the second most frequent (as in the meme in the middle of Figure 2). In the English corpus, the difference between neutral (46.87 per cent) and anti-monarchy (43.76 per cent) expectations was very small. Anti-monarchy attitudes featured prominently in both corpora. This finding can be related to the importance of the humorous and critical intentions underlying the memes in our data. Anti-monarchy attitudes were more prevalent in English than in Spanish. Finally, both corpora were similar in the very infrequent occurrence of pro-monarchy instances (an example is the meme on the right in Figure 2).



Figure 2. Different expectations about audience's attitudes towards monarchy

Our results partly confirm the tendency to publish critical opinions of the monarchy, which Hallgren (2024) and Sumaila et al. (2025) identified as part of the viral event that tried to counter and upset narratives of dominance and nostalgia of the mainstream media event. The analysis also shows the importance of sharing humorous memes for the sake of entertainment and amusement, even when no criticism of the monarchy is intended. The memes in our data with purely humorous or critical intentions are cases of what has been referred to as disaster or dark humour (Bischetti et al., 2021), which is often employed during hard times (e.g. Covid pandemic, see Yus, 2021; Yus & Maíz-Arévalo, 2023) as a coping mechanism to reduce anxiety (Blaber et al., 2021; Dynel, 2021, among others). The passing away of the British monarch should not be understood as a ‘disaster’; still, humour in relation to her death in the comments in our data are here considered to be instances of dark humour. The therapeutic function of bereavement humour (Wilson et al., 2023), i.e. its use as a means of coping with grief for the (in this case, parasocial) loss of a dear one, was not present in our corpora. On the contrary, dark humour was used for entertainment and ideological criticism. Additionally, as could be expected, few of the memes in our data were pro-monarchy, which may suggest that sincere mourning and sympathy for the loss of the Queen is at odds with humorous memes. In fact, many memes were extracted from online news stories and sites that presented them as the most disrespectful or funny (see Section 3). The predominant use of humorous and critical memes also reveals changes in mourning etiquette in the public sphere, since an unwritten social rule of proper behaviour in times of mourning warns about speaking ill of the decedent. The breach of this social convention in our corpora confirms such changes and suggests the prevalence of the laughing *at* mourning type of humour rather than the type that involves laughing *while* mourning. Thus, our study aligns with those that find changes in social norms associated with mourning practices (Bou-Franch, 2023; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2024; Giaxoglou, 2021; Wagner, 2018).

In sum, the ideologies underlying humorous memes were similar in both languages, as they shared humorous and critical intentions and a mainly neutral or anti-monarchy attitude. In this sense, humorous memes can be said to create feelings of bonding and group membership, which highlight the phatic effects of this type of digital communication.

#### **4.2. Mutuality of information**

The humorous memes in our data revealed the existence of expectations of mutuality of information. These expectations referred to areas of collective emotion – whether suffering or joy, positive or negative – in relation to an event, people or places, as shown in Table 3. The shared presence of areas of mutuality of information has been referred to as *joy of mutual manifestness* (Yus, 2004, 2016), since accessibility to and understanding of such areas is crucial for the successful understanding of humour in the data.

Table 3. Expectations of mutuality of information

SPANISH CORPUS		ENGLISH CORPUS	
Local knowledge	20	Longevity	19
British monarchy	15	British monarchy	14
Longevity	11	Local knowledge	13
TV shows / films	11	Colonialism	11
Spanish monarchy	5	TV shows / films	10
Social media	5	Funeral/Death	8
Funeral	4	Religion	4
Games & sports	3	Mourners' reactions	4
Colonialism	3	Social media	3
British life	2	Celebrities	3

The top areas of mutuality of information were nearly the same in frequency in both corpora, with contextual assumptions about local knowledge, the British monarchy, longevity and TV shows/films as the most prominent in the Spanish corpus, and longevity, British monarchy, local knowledge, colonialism and TV shows/films, in the English corpus, both in descending order of frequency of occurrence. The area of colonialism was an exception, as it was far more frequent in English than in Spanish. The following examples illustrate the areas of mutuality of information about longevity and TV shows / films, which featured prominently in both corpora.

AFISIONADA JEJ  
AMATEUR LOL



Figure 3. Mutuality of information: TV shows/films and longevity

For the successful understanding of the memes in Figure 3, users need to access information regarding specific *TV shows/films* and of *longevity*. To understand the Spanish meme correctly, user need to have access to contextual information about (a) the public figure depicted therein, Jordi Hurtado, a well-known Spanish TV host, and (b) the very long time he has hosted shows on Spanish TV. By combining the visual information with the text, in which the host laughs while calling the Queen “amateur”, the meme underlines his victory over the Queen in an imaginary longevity race. As to the English meme, users would need to retrieve information about (a) a well-known action film, *National Treasure*, in which (b) there is a hunt for an ancient

treasure. Again, the text over the image underlines the anciencey and long life of the treasure, which includes the Queen herself. Both memes, therefore, expect users to access areas of mutuality of information regarding broadcast entertainment and longevity in order to derive humorous effects. Incidentally, both memes further share the same underlying ideology, as the intention of the meme creator/user seems to be just humorous and the positioning was classified as neutral, i.e., neither pro- nor anti-monarchy.

Going back to the areas of mutuality of information, *colonialism* was the third most prominent area in the English corpus but only featured moderately in Spanish. Another important difference is that in the English corpus, more than half the occurrences referred to Ireland whereas, in the Spanish corpus, all cases mentioned Gibraltar. In the Spanish meme of Figure 4, the audience need to share the knowledge that (a) Gibraltar is a British territory in the Spanish peninsula, which is claimed by the Spanish government, and (b) the woman in the picture is the Spanish Minister of Defence. In the British meme, the audience need to share knowledge of (a) the TV series *Peaky Blinders* and the powerful role of its main character (on the left of both images), Irish actor Cillian Murphy, and (b) British rule in Ireland's colonial history.



Figure 4. Mutuality of information: Colonialism

The area of mutuality of information about the *British monarchy* deserves special attention. It was the second-most frequent area – which was, perhaps, an unexpected finding in the Spanish corpus – and included the same subareas in both corpora, namely, shared contextual assumptions about the Queen’s pets, her relationship with her daughters-in-law, especially Lady Diana, and about the then Prince Charles, who was the object of criticism in both corpora. The area of *local knowledge* was also especially interesting, as it ties meme comprehension to knowledge of local people, places and events. Local knowledge regarding politicians, celebrities, national health services, football or gastronomy emerged as necessary to understand Spanish memes while local knowledge of specific places like Balmoral or the British Museum and the origins of some of its contents, festivities, politics, gastronomy or even literature were central in English memes.

*La primera mascota nunca se olvida*  
The first pet is never forgotten



Poster 1. Charles unplugging the  
hologram



Poster 2. \*\*\* i think you mean



Figure 5. Areas of mutuality: British monarchy and local knowledge

Thus, to derive humorous effects, the audience of the Spanish meme in Figure 5 should share the information that (a) The Queen was a pet lover, and that (b) dinosaurs are extinct and lived a very long time ago. On the other hand, to interpret successfully the English meme, online users should be aware that (a) the Royal family live in the UK and that (b) the standard plugs and sockets in the UK are those in the bottom image.

### 4.3. Humorous strategies

The analysis of the humorous strategies followed Yus' (2013, 2016) *Intersecting Circles Model* and yielded the results shown in Table 4. Alteration of the make-sense frame and implicated premises and conclusions were the most frequently employed strategies in the Spanish corpus while discourse interpretation and implicated premises and conclusions were the top strategies in the English corpus. The least frequent strategy in both corpora was emphasising cultural assumptions.

Table 4. Expectations of meme discourse comprehension

SPANISH CORPUS	N	%	ENGLISH CORPUS	N	%
1. Alteration of the mental frame constructed to make sense of the meme	18	30	1. Alteration of the mental frame constructed to make sense of the meme	14	21.87
2. Emphasising cultural assumptions	4	6.66	2. Emphasising cultural assumptions	6	9.37
3. Implicated premises and conclusions	17	28.33	3. Implicated premises and conclusions	21	32.81
4. Discourse interpretation	13	21.66	4. Discourse interpretation	23	35.93

The example in Figure 6 illustrates the make-sense frame, which alters the recipients' inferential path. The meme builds a mental situation or frame of the Queen's many life experiences, of the many historical milestones she witnessed, only to alter such frame by adding a mismatching element about an event of far less cultural and historical importance – placed on the same level as the previous events - which she missed. Simultaneously, the meme is critical of the new element, in this case, a particular football team that did not manage to win a title during the Queen's lifetime.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ☞ <i>Ha enterrado a 8 presidentes de EE.UU.</i>           | ☞ She buried 8 US presidents                               |
| ☞ <i>Ha enterrado a 5 papas</i>                           | ☞ She buried 5 popes                                       |
| ☞ <i>Vió llegar y vió irse a los Beatles</i>              | ☞ She saw the Beatles come and go                          |
| ☞ <i>Vio levantar y vio derrumbarse el muro de Berlín</i> | ☞ She saw the Berlin wall build and collapse               |
| ☞ <i>Pero no vio al Celta de Vigo ganar un título</i>     | ☞ But she didn't see <name of a football team> win a title |



Figure 6. Alteration of the make-sense frame

The examples in Figure 7 illustrate the strategy of implicated premises and conclusions, which was the second most frequent strategy in both languages. Through this strategy, meme creators expect their audience to be able to retrieve from context the necessary contextual assumptions (*implicated premises*) that allow for the derivation of implicatures (*implicated conclusions*). Thus, for the correct, humorous, interpretation of the Spanish meme, users need to access the implicated premise that the relationship between Spain's King Emeritus and the current Queen is not good and hence derive the implicated conclusion that the head of protocol of the British monarchy will be in trouble for seating them next to each other.

*Funeral de Isabel II. El responsable de protocolo de la monarquía británica después de sentar al rey emérito junto a la reina Letizia.*

Elizabeth II's funeral. The head of protocol of the British monarchy after seating the King Emeritus next to Queen Letizia.



Diana practicing in heaven



Figure 7. Implicated premises and conclusions in meme comprehension

Similarly, to understand the English meme, which shows Homer Simpson practicing his fighting skills, users need to access the implicated premise that Lady Diana and the Queen were not in good terms to derive the conclusion that their symbolic heavenly encounter will not be friendly.

Finally, Figure 8 illustrates the most frequently used strategy in the English corpus, i.e. discourse interpretation. In previous research on humour, Yus (2016) isolated alterations in the predicted inferential patterns for comprehension, including the play with polysemy/homonymy, or literal vs. metaphoric meanings, among other strategies. The example exploits disambiguation and the tendency to invariably select one single (i.e. relevant) sense of a word, which is invalidated in this case, since two senses of “die” - literal and metaphorical - need to be inferred simultaneously to achieve the desired humorous effects. This account of ambiguity refers to the specific on-going inferential strategy aimed at obtaining a relevant interpretation of the discourse, which is manipulated for the sake of humour. Further shades of ambiguity may exist, though, due to the multiplicity of meme audiences, with clear pragmatic implications. Indeed, ambiguities may also result from the very fact that messages are often displaced from their original context online, moving away from their initial intended audience, and giving rise to variations in the intended meaning. As Phillips & Milner (2017, p. 122) contend, what the original creator meant to communicate with a meme is often difficult to interpret, and within different communities, groups, or dyads, the same meme may result in different interpretations, thus acquiring a certain interpretive ambiguity that the initial creator probably had no intention to generate in their prospective audience.

When you add Queen Elizabeth II's face  
on your meme so that it doesn't DIE like  
your other memes



Figure 8. Discourse interpretation

As can be seen, different strategies centred upon the inference of the meme discourse are at work in the generation of humorous effects, with special prominence of the expectation of retrieval of implicated premises, assumed to be mutually shared by meme creator and audience, and the derivation of implicated conclusions, the former being itself a possible source of humour, that is, the joy in how the mutuality of information is revealed through successful meme interpretation.

#### **4.4. Mourning**

The discourse of mourning and death was explored by examining the mourning strategies used in the generation of the humorous memes. The most common strategies identified in our corpora are shown in Table 5. The taxonomy was informed by extant research and developed in a bottom-up manner during the analysis, as already explained (Section 3). The strategy that includes references to the afterlife is new, and it came up in both languages. This strategy may be specific to mourning-related humorous memes. In addition, the sub strategy of employing the metadiscourse of memes as a mark of appreciation for the deceased is also new and can be related to the virality of memes.

Table 5. Mourning strategies

	Spanish memes		English memes	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Acknowledgment of death</i>	2	8.7	5	18.5
<i>Appreciation for the deceased</i>	13	56.5	16	59.25
• <i>Expressing admiration</i>	5		7	
• <i>Reminiscing</i>	4		0	
• <i>Memorialising</i>	1		4	
• <i>Metadiscourse of memes</i>	3		5	
<i>Comforting the bereaved</i>	2	8.7	1	3.7
<i>Religious statements</i>	1	4.3	0	
<i>Expressing condolences</i>	1	4.3	1	3.7
<i>Referring to the afterlife</i>	4	17.4	4	14.8
<i>Total number of strategies</i>	23		27	

As can be observed, overall, strategies of mourning were slightly more frequent in the English than in the Spanish corpus. In both languages, the most common strategy was to show appreciation for the deceased, mostly by expressing admiration. However, the second most frequent sub-strategy in Spanish, i.e. reminiscing, was not found in the English corpus, while the least frequent form of appreciation in Spanish, i.e. memorialising, was the third most frequent in English. The sub strategy of using metadiscourse of memes was common in both corpora. The second most frequent strategy in Spanish was to refer to the afterlife, which came third in the English corpora. In the latter, the acknowledgement of death was the second most prominent pattern. The remaining strategies – comforting the bereaved, providing religious statements and expressing condolences – were infrequent in both languages.

Liza Minnelli has  
outlived Queen  
Elizabeth II, the greatest  
monarch of all times



*Una mujer capaz de vestir  
todos los colores del  
pantonario no debería morir  
nunca*

A lady capable of dressing in  
all pantone colours should  
never die



Put this image in an art  
gallery



Figure 9. Expressing appreciation

The instances in Figure 9 illustrate three different ways of expressing appreciation for the Queen. To the left, the use of the superlative “greatest” and the reinforcing “of all times” intensifies the expression of admiration for the monarch in a comment published in a Liza Minnelli fan account. The middle comment shows appreciation for the Queen by textually and visually reminiscing the many colours she used to dress in. The meme on the right shows appreciation through memorialising and requesting that a machine in tribute of the Queen be preserved in an art gallery. The different expressions of appreciation are used, alongside other resources, to generate humour in different ways. The Liza Minnelli fan account uses the expression of admiration to enhance the longevity – and, in a way, superiority – of the artist. The last two comments achieve humour through exaggeration and the absurdity that someone should never die because of their clothing style or that an odd vending machine with a Burger’s franchise is a memorial worthy of consideration as a work of art.

Figure 10 expresses indirect appreciation for the Queen by using the metadiscourse about memes, in this case, by referring to the addictive impulse to look up memes in relation to significant events. As Marino (2015) contends, memes serve as a hook to users’ agency, inviting them in turn to spread, modify or recreate the text. Despite the variety of themes and figures they carry, they all feature a striking element, usually a playful one (an incongruity, a ‘mistake’), which serves as a hook to users’ engagement and their addiction to searching them online.

*Yo buscando los mejores memes de lo de la reina Isabel en lugar de estar  
trabajando*

Me looking for the best memes about queen Elizabeth instead of doing my  
job

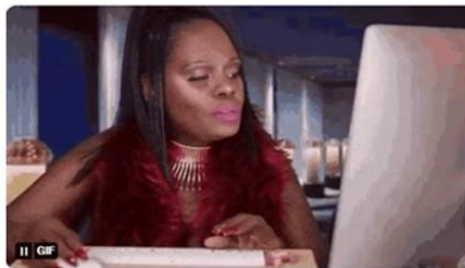


Figure 10. Expressing appreciation: metadiscourse about memes

References to the Queen’s afterlife were the second most frequent strategy in Spanish and came third in English. In both corpora, this often involved her crossing paths with her former daughter-in-law, Lady Diana. For instance, Figure 7 in Section 4.3 above, which shows Homer Simpson fighting practice, projects an afterlife scenario in which the former princess will supposedly have to engage in a fight with the Queen. Incidentally, posters created afterlife scenarios in which, in their opinion, relationships would resume.

The expression of condolences and sympathy, which are expected actions when someone passes away (Elwood, 2004), was nearly absent from the data and, when it occurred, it often took unexpected directions, thus generating humour. An example of expressing condolences can be found in Figure 2 (meme in the middle), in which the “rip princess diana” is written. In Spanish, a poster gave their condolences to Prince Charles for having to start working at the age of 73.

Although all but one of the mourning strategies had been previously identified in the literature reviewed in Section 2, our findings only partially confirm those of the only previous contrastive study of English and Spanish online condolences. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2024) found that the most frequent strategy in both languages was the acknowledgement of death; however, this was barely present in the Spanish corpus although it was frequent in English one. Similarly, comforting the bereaved was very frequent in their study but hardly occurred in our corpora. In contrast, our study aligns with Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2024) research regarding the prominence of the strategy of expressing appreciation for the deceased, even though the ways in which this strategy was realised in the present study were at times novel.

## **5. Conclusion**

The present study set out to investigate the use of humour in times of mourning, which, we suggested, can take two forms: laughing *at* mourning and laughing *while* mourning. As was argued, contrastive pragmatic studies of humorous memes in mourning scenarios are rare and require more attention. To help us begin to fill this gap, two corpora of humorous memes, in English and Spanish, triggered by the death of Queen Elizabeth II, were compiled and analysed. A four-pronged analysis was designed, which tapped into the memes' ideology, predicted mutuality of information, humorous strategies and the discourse of mourning.

Our study was guided by four research questions which we reproduce and answer in the following paragraphs.

The first research question (RQ1) inquired about the ideology underlying humorous memes in terms of intentions and attitudes. The intention of both Spanish and English memes was mainly purely humorous, with criticism also playing an important role. The findings pointed to the absence of post-death bereavement humour (Wilson et al., 2023) and showed, instead, the prominence of dark humour (Bischetti et al., 2021) on social media. Both corpora showed that the intention to mourn the deceased was insignificant. Not surprisingly, the attitude towards the monarchy was mainly neutral, with British memes expressing disaffiliation with the crown more frequently. This could be part of what Hallgren (2024) labels the *viral event* that challenged the conservative positions broadcast in mainstream media during the Queen's funeral thus creating "a variety of possibilities to interpret the event and its meaning in history" (Sumaila et al., 2025, p. 10). We would like to argue that the ideologies underlying humorous memes in mourning, which were mostly shared by posters in both languages, can be understood as marks of in-groupness – standing in contrast to pro-monarchy mourners. Therefore, they foster group bonding and highlight the relevance of the phatic effects that stem from this type of communication.

Another important conclusion is that the widespread use of humorous and critical memes reveals shifts in public mourning etiquette; more specifically, the unwritten social norm that discourages speaking ill of the deceased (Page, 2018). Wagner (2018) argues that social media platforms are not isolated but connected to other social spaces; thus, specific norms of conduct are constantly negotiated among participants. In this sense, previous research had already identified this social change in online mourning; however, the specific use of humorous memes of the laughing *at* mourning type had not been scrutinised and can now be said to constitute another way in which practices in times of mourning are negotiated and change.

The second research question (RQ2) aimed to explore the expected context accessibility necessary for the successful interpretation of the memes. Our analysis revealed several areas of mutuality of information that were attached to collective emotion of a positive nature, i.e. the aforementioned "joy of mutual manifestness" in sharing humour about the royal death and

collective awareness of being able to infer it correctly. Aside from the topic of colonialism, the most common areas of shared information were almost identical in both corpora, and included contextual assumptions about local knowledge, the British monarchy, longevity, and TV shows/films. Expectations about local knowledge of such varied aspects like politicians, sports, places or gastronomy, tied the humorous memes to the relevant local cultures and reduced the accessibility of humorous effects to audiences that shared such knowledge. Most memes dealing with colonialism referred to Ireland in the British corpus and Gibraltar in the Spanish one. Incidentally, contextual assumptions regarding British colonialism, which were especially numerous in the British memes, blended discourses of humour and protest within a mourning scenario (see Bou-Franch, 2023; Giaxoglou, 2021; Hallgren, 2022; Sumaila et al., 2025).

To provide an answer to the third research question (RQ3), we examined the humorous strategies necessary for the correct interpretation of memes (Yus, 2013, 2016). In our data, both languages differed in their most frequent humorous strategy: Spanish relied on the make-sense frame, which disrupts a mental situation that is being mentally built in the meme, while English favoured the strategy of discourse interpretation. However, both languages agreed in their second most common design of humour, i.e. playing with implicated premises and conclusions. As already mentioned, implicatures are fully inferential and demand the addressee's accessibility to contextual information (implicated premises) that allow for their derivation. Vivid evidence of the mutuality of this contextual information, revealed through successful meme interpretation, is itself a major source of relevant non-propositional effects in the shape of in-group feelings and emotions.

Our last research question (RQ4) addressed the strategies of mourning and condoling found in the memes. Interestingly, although the mourning intention was infrequent in both corpora (RQ1), the humorous memes in our data drew from the discourse of mourning to generate humour and criticism. Over half the memes in both languages generated humour and criticism by showing appreciation for the deceased. A second and new mechanism related to mourning was to make references to the afterlife by creating hypothetical, humorous scenarios of what the Queen's (or her relative's) afterlife would be like. Incidentally, the strategy of expressing sympathy through condolences, which has been identified as central to mourning in prior research, was scarcely present in the data, showing once again that meme creators and users were not actually in a state of mourning and the underlying context was one of laughing *at* mourning.

In view of the findings above, we would like to revisit the distinction we posed between two ways of generating humour in the context of mourning: laughing *while* mourning and laughing *at* mourning. In situations in which laughing *while* mourning prevails, bereavement humour works as a tool to alleviate the pain and sadness associated with the loss of a dear person, or more generally to cope with stressful situations. It has, in sum, a therapeutic function that helps mourners to cope and bond. By contrast, in situations of laughing *at* mourning, the target of humour could be the deceased, their relatives, the mourners themselves and their reactions, or the very act of mourning. In this situation, humour does not exhibit the function of coping with loss, but rather the death of a person and, in the case our corpora, her past, her relatives, the (over)reactions of some mourners, and the pomp and ceremony of the royal funeral seem to emerge as an excuse for humour. It is in this situation that disaffiliative discourses of criticism and protest are associated with humorous discourse. The situation of laughing *at* mourning is, in our view, the one that prevailed in our corpora, and was realised by combining the discourses of humour, criticism and mourning.

One limitation of this study is the reduced number of memes in our corpora and their extraction from a variety of platforms. While we aimed to explore how humour and mourning combine in memes to provide a first glimpse, further research is needed to conduct large-scale studies and compare the two types of humour in times of mourning proposed in this study.

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