

# “The General Said”: challenges in understanding Covid-19 memes

**Desislava Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva**

Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Bulgaria  
[d.stoycheva@shu.bg](mailto:d.stoycheva@shu.bg)

## Abstract

*Times of trial require resorting to new methods for venting up the tension. Internet memes during the first outbreak of the pandemic proved to be the necessary outlet, while, at the same time, provided a platform for the public to share their opinion, albeit in a humorous way, on the measures imposed, the people involved in the fight against the virus, and basically on everything that determined their everyday lives. The latter has been fostered greatly by the fact that humour is a generally relatable phenomenon. At the same time though, it can also be culture specific and some peculiarities of the embedded message can remain hidden for the general public. In order to trace these opposing aspects in the creation of internet memes, the paper analyses a corpus of 84 memes circulated on Facebook and Instagram in the period of 13 March 2020 – 30 May 2020. The subject in all these memes is General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, who was in charge of the struggle with COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria, and the main methods of analysis are Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis.*

*The focus is on intertextuality and the paper argues that some of the intertextual links used in the creation of the memes might be left misunderstood by the general public due to the specificity of the message carried or the images that have been selected by the authors of these pieces of digital humour. Thus, mediation, i.e. the time needed to decode the message, would be longer for people who are not familiar with the images or ideas used, while smaller for those aware of them. Additionally, the paper argues that the age of the recipients as well as their personal preferences are also of significance for the proper understanding of the message a meme carries. Furthermore, the analysis also proves the fact that although some images might be used simply as a background and do not carry substantial information, without them one cannot understand the full array of ideas the author/ poster of a particular meme is trying to convey.*

*Keywords: Internet memes, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Covid-19, CDA, multimodality.*

## 1. Introduction

A famous Bulgarian saying by Radoy Ralin goes: “Светът е оцелял, защото се е смял” (‘The world lasts because it laughs’). This probably could not have been more true when the whole

world was faced with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and wave after wave we all tried to keep our sanity and endurance and somehow survive the whole craze of the disaster.

The load of information people got exposed to is mind-boggling and at a period when people were also confined to their homes, social media provided an outlet to vent this whole tension through. The various jokes exchanged, commented on, transmitted and altered provided the necessary breath of fresh air that kept us going. Naturally, in a period when social distancing and online existence was the norm, and thus digital culture was thriving and expanding, the number of internet memes as a very short, nevertheless content intense bits of humorously presented information, abounded.

While it is true that humour is a relatable phenomenon, i.e. it can be considered universal and as such it can unite people (Genova, 2020; Meyer, 2000), it is also a fact that it can be culture specific (Dimova, 2004; Tsakona, 2020). The latter is further supported by Eagleton (2021, p. 10) who states that even though universal, laughter is not a “uniform” phenomenon. The differences are embedded in the peculiarities associated with cultures which have been shaped by geography, history, lifestyle, religion, ethnicity, etc., as well as by the views, beliefs and experiences of each recipient when decoding a particular message (see also Hall, 1993). In the same vein, Tsakona (2020, p. 171) states that “[w]hen interpreting humorous texts, recipients evoke specific scripts, namely previous experiences and knowledge of the world (including, and/or included in, previous texts) to make sense of the humorous material at hand” and further that

[i]t should also be noted that this intertextual dimension of humor is directly related to the fact that different sociocultural communities exploit different scripts or background knowledge to create humor, thus resulting in more or less significant differences in humor. It is not uncommon for different sociocultural communities not to share the same scripts or not to evoke the same background information for humorous purposes, and this may lead to misunderstandings or failure of humor [...]

(Tsakona, 2020, p. 171-172)

The various conclusions reached in terms of the essence of humour in general, and the conditions for its perception and understanding in particular, apply to memes as well, as humour is invariably inherent in this new genre of online communication (Genova, 2020). Therefore, following the same line of thought, memes as “units of cultural information” (Dawkins, 1976) could also be defined as culture specific. Simultaneously though, it could also be claimed that non-verbal image macros are more universal, thereby easier to understand, than those composed of both a verbal and a non-verbal element. Still, being also highly intertextual and ideological in nature, it can be assumed that non-verbal memes in general are open to more interpretations than those of mixed codes.

In addition, it has to be borne in mind that, as Wiggins observes, although memes are usually humorous in nature and their main characteristic can be defined as levity, they are also frequently resorted to in order for users to express “some degree of social, cultural, or political critique” (2019, p. 59; see also Denisova, 2019, for her analysis of memes as a mode of expressing resistance and a tool for propaganda as well). In this case they are usually directed towards a governing body, organisation or other authority, or power elite, if Van Dijk’s term is to be used (Van Dijk, 2006, 2013).

As the paper analyses a corpus of memes centered around the image of a Bulgarian political figure, i.e. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, who became very popular and was one of the pivotal figures in the fight against COVID-19 (see also Ilieva, 2021 on the phenomenon of (anti)fandom), it is

to be expected that although humorous in nature, as incongruity<sup>1</sup> is one of their defining features (see Genova, 2020), the memes in question would address various aspects of the measures imposed during the pandemic, thus present a critical stand or at least share bits and pieces of public opinion on related issues and reflect the emotions members of the general population have. Furthermore, memes would also reflect power differences as it is common for people to express their opinion about people in power, i.e. General Mutafchiyski, through this creative means of communication as it provides them with the opportunity to hide their true identity. At the same time, as the subject of the memes is culturally bound, it is also to be assumed that the message transferred by this particular corpus of memes that circulated Facebook, mostly through a group titled “The General Said”<sup>2</sup> and reposted on Instagram<sup>3</sup>, would be difficult to understand for people outside Bulgarian culture.

## 2. Theoretical background

The subject matter of the paper falls within the premises of critical analysis of internet memes and as such it is closely related with the general theories on internet memes, while at the same time, it is also a continuation of the studies on Covid-19 memes in particular and still more closely of those on memes featuring General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski.

Scholars working in the field are unanimous that it was Richard Dawkins (1976) who in his *Selfish gene* was the first to use the term *meme* and link it with the idea of evolution of culture through copying or imitation. The theorists after Dawkins took up the idea of meme as a unit of cultural information and developed it further, focusing on the Internet meme as a specific and new genre with its own peculiar structure<sup>4</sup>, whose main characteristics are intertextuality and ideology (Millner, 2012, 2016; Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019), and which is frequently used to joke, to bring people together, to express an idea, opinion, or comment on a particular issue or a phenomena and as such can be used also as a propaganda tool (DeCook, 2018; Denisova, 2019) or a means for expressing social discontent (Mina, 2019; Zannettou et al., 2018). Internet memes are also characterised with their creativity, spreadability and the fact that they always form groups and are never an isolated occurrence (Genova, 2020; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). In their most generic sense internet memes are “enormous groups of texts and images” (Shifman 2014, p. 341) and “collections of collections” (Shifman 2014, p. 342).

Discussing the forms memes can take Ryan Milner elaborates that “Internet memes take the form of pictures captioned on Reddit, puns hashtagged on Twitter, and videos mashed up on YouTube. They can be widely shared catchphrases, Auto-Tuned songs, manipulated stock photos, or recordings of physical performances” (2016, p. 1) and they are inherently multimodal and reappropriated (Milner, 2016). Scholars are unanimous that the most common form of memes used on social media is the so-called image macro, which, as explained by Dynel (2016,

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by Genova (2020, p. 301) incongruity or incompatibility is used to show the clash of two incompatible perspectives in terms of subject, situation or notion, deviation of what is expected or two alternative meanings, placed together.

<sup>2</sup> This Facebook group was created right after the first briefings of the Head Quarters and posted exclusively memes with the image of the general. In this sense, it can be stated that all memes were a result of participatory culture and put together they told a story about the period. In addition, older memes assisted the understanding of those developed afterwards.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to trace the origin of the analysed memes as websites providing such information (KnowYourMemes.com, for example) did not recognize many of the memes comprising the set of memes analysed in the paper. Exception was made for meme [3], which was recognized, while the other memes featuring movie references in their non-verbal part were partially recognized as the remixed version with the general was not shown.

<sup>4</sup> On the generic and structural peculiarities of internet memes as an online communication means, see Genova (2020).

p. 661), is “an image and a creative caption submitted by a user, typically to induce humorous responses in its receivers”. In general, the “template” of an internet meme is explained as similar to a joke in the fact that it is comprised of a set-up and a punchline, whose disambiguation and the achievement of humorous effect depends heavily on incongruity (Lin, Huang & Hsu, 2014, pp. 144-145; see also Yus, 2020). Scholars differ in their opinion as to what serves as the punchline as in some cases it can be the verbal element (usually the caption under the image or at its bottom) (Lin, Huang & Hsu, 2014; Yus, 2020), while in others, the image itself (Kumar & Varier, 2020), mostly depending on the type of memes analysed. In terms of authorship memes are considered a result of collective effort (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Denisova, 2019) and as such their authors are largely anonymous in which they resemble some elements of oral culture, such as jokes or stories. In addition, following Denisova (2019, p. 9), in the tradition of storytelling memes can be altered and changed with each retelling based on the perspective of the person sharing them. As such memes are defined as “the artefacts of remix culture” (Denisova, 2019, p. 9), and further “an imitable text that Internet users appropriate, adjust and share in the digital sphere” (Denisova, 2019, p.10) in order to convey their opinion on all possible issues be they personal or social. In a very interesting case study focusing on the same persona and using corpus compiled from the same Facebook group “The General Said!”, Angelina Ilieva (2021) looks at the creation of the phenomena of (anti-)fandom analysing the way recipients interpret and understand the image of General Mutafchiyski created by the media. Ilieva (2021) introduced the notion of participatory pandemic (Ilieva, 2021, p. 71) in order to describe the phenomenon of fandom as the public response to the pandemic in Bulgaria. Analysing the various transformations that the General underwent in the memes produced in the period of the first wave of the pandemic, the author states that they are “the results of a collective creative play of imagination and interpretation; they emanate from the shared pleasure of producing new cultural forms, by the fans and for the fans” and further that “[t]he active engagement with the cultural practices of fandom [...] has indisputably positive socio-psychological effects” (Ilieva, 2021, p. 69).

Using these stipulations as starting points in this paper I will try to trace the intertextual references used in the creation of Mutafchiyski’s memes and assess the possible challenges recipients might experience in decoding the whole message carried. Simultaneously, I will also look into the generality or specificity of the memes and assess their relatability.

Before delving into the analysis of some of the most interesting memes in the corpus, there is the need to provide some information on intertextuality and ideology<sup>5</sup> as the two main characteristics of internet memes. As stated “internet memes are not merely *content items* and thus simply replicators of culture but are rather visual arguments, which are semiotically constructed with intertextual references to reflect an ideological practice.” (Wiggins 2019, p. 9, italics in the original text).

Both ideology and intertextuality are topics that have been widely researched. Both phenomena also confront us on a daily basis through the various media. When consulting Collins English Dictionary (1991) the following definitions can be found in terms of what ideology is:

1. (Government, Politics & Diplomacy) a body of ideas that reflects the beliefs and interests of a nation, political system, etc and underlies political action;
2. (Philosophy) philosophy social the set of beliefs by which a group or society orders reality so as to render it intelligible;
3. speculation that is imaginary or visionary;
4. (Philosophy) the study of the nature and origin of ideas.

In turn, Eagleton (2007, pp. 1-2) provides as many as 16 different definitions of the term that are used at the time and questions the validity of some. He concludes that ideology can be used as an umbrella term for a host of “things we do with signs”, therefore presenting it as “a

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<sup>5</sup> The latter would not be an object of research in this analysis.

discursive or semiotic phenomenon” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 193). Wiggins (2019, p. 25ff.) equates ideology with discourse as for the former to function it should be shared in one way or another, and that in particular is the function of the latter. The distinction he makes between the two is in the fact that discourse is “purposeful, while ideology is ideational”. Quoting mostly Storey (2006), Wiggins (2019, p. 25ff) provides several definitions of the term. In some cases, they closely resemble the ones provided by Collins Dictionary and laid out by Eagleton (2007). Thus, ideology is defined as “a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people” (Storey, 2006, p. 2, qtd. in Wiggins 2019, p. 25), as well as a version of reality, serving the needs of the dominant majority in which the majority is not seen as the oppressor (Storey, 2006, p. 2; see also Van Dijk 2006, 2013); texts are also viewed as conveying specific ideology and here Wiggins relies both on Storey (2006) as well as on Stuart Hall (1980), the latter of whom claims that codes “are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses” (134, qtd. in Wiggins, 2019, p. 25). Van Dijk (2013, p. 217) further states that ideologies are discursively created and, therefore, “a discourse analytical approach is crucial to understand the ways ideologies emerge, spread, and are used by social groups” (Van Dijk, 2013, p. 218). Further, Wiggins (2019, p. 27) also refers to Roland Barthes (1977) and his idea of myth as a synonym to ideology based mostly on “the connotative power of text-image relationship” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 27). Last but not least, ideology is presented as “a set of beliefs and practices which serve to connect a person to the world and vice versa” (Wiggins, 2019; see also Cranston 2020; van Dijk 2013). This is especially true for memes as they are a means of self-expression of an individual or of the stand of a group on a particular matter and the ideas conveyed through them create the feeling of in-group among the people creating, remixing, exchanging, commenting or simply sharing them. Furthermore, as Aronson and Jaffal (2021) state, memes are a means for “political and social expression”, while Wiggins (2019) concludes that through them people can express their opinion and “seek to challenge or critique, for example, a political opponent” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 28) and further that memes employ “some form of critique of a social, cultural, political, economic, and/or related phenomena” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 30). The latter is especially appropriate when considering the analysis of political memes. However, as important a characteristic of memes as it is, it will not be taken up in this analysis but will be left as an object of future research. The focus here, as stated above, is on the other important characteristic of memes, namely intertextuality, and the problems recipients might experience in decoding the internet memes on General Mutafchyski.

Intertextuality is associated with the existing variety of relations between different texts. Kristeva (1980), the scholar who first introduced the term, postulates that a text could never be viewed as a unique construct but always in relation to other texts. In the most generic understanding of the concept, it can be related through different quotes, citations, parody, allusions, and even plagiarism (Velykoroda & Moroz, 2021, p. 58). Being more specific Fairclough (1992) differentiates between manifest (quotes, paraphrases, topics, etc.) and constitutive (imitating particular genre specific structures) intertextuality (later on he uses the term interdiscursivity for this type of intertextuality; see also Dobрева & Dobrev, 2013). The reference to the constitutive types of the phenomena comes to confirm the fact that, as stated by Allen (2022, p. 170), intertextuality is not only a literary phenomenon, thereby not confined only to that genre, but to other forms of art as well.

All of the above is closely linked to the subject at hand as memes are a genre in their own right, however, they are often composed of two or more different forms of art, therefore, the references embodied in them would require some background knowledge on behalf of the recipients. That notion has been supported by Eco (1993) who attributes a more active role to the reader who has to recognise as well as understand the intertextual links (qtd. in Velykoroda & Moroz, 2021, p. 58). As Velykoroda and Moroz (2021, p. 57) state “[w]hen the authors of media articles insert intertextual fragments in their texts, their obvious intention would be to add

color or expression to their texts, at the same time expecting the reader to immediately recognise the reference and end up with the intended meaning of the utterance.” In a similar vein, Yaneva (2018) clarifies that the visual element in memes provides a background using the psychology of a particular people and the historic links they have established (see also Tsakona, 2020). Quoting other scholars, Yaneva (2018) also concludes that the visual element is easier to comprehend than the verbal one and its decoding involves the background information as well as the message of the author/ poster of the meme and that their effectiveness depends on the historic and cultural aspects of their interpretation.

Analysing the time needed to understand the meaning of the references used, i.e. to establish the link between the two texts (original and produced), Graustein and Thiele (1987, pp. 23-27) introduce the concept of mediation. It can be big in unfamiliar texts and small when the texts alluded to are familiar and popular. This aspect is of particular importance for the analysis at hand as images, quotes, titles of popular texts would require less time to process and relate to and thus their meaning and ideology would be understood more quickly than less familiar texts. A similar observation is reached by Mavrodieva (2021) who, analysing COVID-19 memes featuring General Mutafchiyski from the beginning of the pandemic, states that the authors of these Bulgarian memes have chosen popular songs which provide the opportunity for the message to be easily decoded and do not cause any language barriers. According to her, the same tendency is observed in the cases when the multimodal messages used are further supported by images. The latter contribute to the fast understanding of the whole message (Mavrodieva, 2021, p. 19). In this case, she speaks of visual multimodality. Another conclusion reached by Mavrodieva (2021, p. 19) is that multimodality in memes targets wider range of recipients and do not always present significant information but is rather triggered by the idea to achieve parody and paraphrase and create good mood with no personal attitude to General Mutafchiyski whatsoever (2021, p. 20).

Mavrodieva’s observations are significant for this study as the corpus she worked with is similar to the one used here. However, the hypotheses put in this analysis differ and I tend to disagree with the conclusion that visual elements are of secondary importance to the general message.

Based on my analysis I claim that 1) failure to relate to the visual image would deprive the recipients of some of the important nuances of the message the meme carries. In addition, I also hypothesize that 2) the understanding of an internet meme is also dependent on the individual’s preferences to the various genres of art employed in its creation.

### **3. Corpus and methods of analysis**

The corpus for this study consists of 84 memes collected primarily from social media sites, mostly the Facebook group “The General said!” (created at the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic). Some of the memes have been also circulated on Instagram and YouTube. The majority of the analysed jokes are in Bulgarian which is understandable as their subject, i.e. Mutafchiyski, is Bulgarian and all his actions are related to the Covid-19 reality in Bulgaria. This in itself already defines the analysed memes as culture specific.

The period covered is March 13 – May 30, 2020 which coincides with the outbreak of the pandemic and the first lockdown nations of this century experienced. As stated all analysed memes have as their subject one particular figure from that period – Major-General Prof. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, MD, DSc, FACS. The reason to select that particular figure is because at that time his name and image were most frequently connected with the fight against the pandemic as he was the Chairperson of the National Operative Headquarters (NOH) for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria.

As the subject at hand includes both verbal and non-verbal elements comprising a whole message that is being transferred, altered and remixed online, the study falls within the premises of critical discourse studies (Fairclough, 1995, 2017; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Van Dijk, 2017) and also uses multimodal discourse analysis (see Çoşkun, 2015; Ledin & Machin, 2017; Wong, 2019).

#### **4. Analysis**

The first wave of the pandemic in Bulgaria produced several very popular figures who formed the first line of defense against the virus. General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was one of them as he was the Chairperson of the National Operative Headquarters (NOH) for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria in the period 24 February 2020 – May 2020. He was present in all briefings of NOH, was very firm in his belief in social distancing, isolation and protection measures, and later on vaccination, as the main means of combatting the pandemic. Difficult times promote creativity, so there was a Facebook group created in the name of the general called “The General Said” (in Bulgarian “Генералът каза”) in which people shared information from briefings, the latest regulations or orders, or just jokes, memes, and posters that featured the general as their main subject. As mentioned by Angelina Ilieva (2021) the group was closed sometime in September 2020.

Based on the way they have been composed, the memes for the purposes of this study are subdivided into three major groups: memes comprised of the image of the general (in one case along with some of his colleagues) with or without any verbal element (5 memes); memes referring to Mutafchiyski (quoting his words or mentioning his name), however, lacking his image (2 memes); and the third and largest group of memes juxtaposing the general to other subjects that could be of Bulgarian or foreign origin (55 using Bulgarian entities and 22 using foreign entities including extraterrestrials). The memes in this last group are composed in a similar manner: their structure imitates a kind of a virtual dialogue between various figures of Bulgarian or international cultural life, such as artists, poets, writers, singers, etc., popular poems, and movies, among others and reflect the different stages of the pandemic which form the context presented in each meme. The latter is also mentioned by Mavrodieva (2021) who, as stated above, analyses memes of the same period which match some of the memes used in this analysis. The scholar rightfully observes that the dialogue is usually comprised of a quote and the response of the general is usually a parody of what he has actually said or a paraphrase which is either polite, laconic or incomplete expressing an approval, a reprimand, a prohibition or a flattery.

As stated above, all memes in the corpus for this study are very specific in their nature appealing mostly to Bulgarian recipients or those familiar with Bulgarian reality during the first wave of the pandemic and the general Bulgarian culture.

This specificity can be easily seen in the following meme:



Figure 1. A banknote with General Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”



The meme is a banknote featuring the image of the general leaning forward, slightly tilted to the left, looking very serious and staring the audience directly in the eyes from over his glasses as if reprimanding them or at least showing that he is dead serious. The note is of a non-existent denomination in Bulgarian currency. The image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and the denomination link the meme to the period of the pandemic when the members of the NOH imposed a fine of 5000 BGN to anyone who dared break their quarantine.

Another intertextual link to the pandemic is to be found in the symbol to the right of the image of the general which can be perceived as a stylised representation of the Corona virus with its round shape and bulbous nodes. The banknote meme very ingeniously links the fine through its explicit presentation first in numbers and then in words, the name and face of the general, the year and the symbolic representation of the virus, and all of them jointly convey the message as to when, what and who, i.e. when the virus struck, what one of the measures was, and who imposed it. The meme is easy to decode for anyone who has experienced that period in Bulgaria or who followed the situation closely. However, the meme would be incomprehensible to a foreigner who is not familiar with the Bulgarian fight against the pandemic on governmental level or the measures imposed. That gives me the right to claim that the message is very culture specific and mediation for Bulgarians in general would be very low, thereby relatability to the meme for Bulgarians would be high, while for foreigners mediation would be very high and relatability – low. Public opinion on the imposed fine differed ranging from viewing it as totally absurd to fully accepting it as the general opinion was that the only way to alter Bulgarians' behaviour was to charge them heavily so they will think twice before attempting the offense a second time. It is difficult to determine whether the meme in this case is created to show discontent or approval of the imposed measure, but it definitely shows the authority Mutafchiyski had.

A big part of the memes in the corpus featured an image or images of movies or were created of remixed movie posters. Movies are a matter of personal choice and, therefore, require different efforts to decode. It can actually be stated that memes featuring snapshots from movies show the personality of their producer/ poster, as they basically reflect their personal preferences, and can therefore appeal and be understood by people with similar tastes in that art. One of the trends in the creation of these memes is the use of well-known movies or series. This strategy naturally relies on the popularity of said sources to foster easier and faster decoding. Still, as already mentioned, preferences vary and small mediation could not be guaranteed by the popularity of the movies employed.

Thus, for example meme [2] is a remix of the poster of the movie *Jumanji: The next level*.



Congratulations! You reached the month of May! Welcome to level two of the pandemic!<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2. General Mutafchiyski as Dr. Bravestone. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

<sup>6</sup> The translations of the verbal part in the memes are done by the author.



The mediation in this meme would be high for people who are not fans of this type of action/adventure type of movies and much of the context of the meme would be left unclear. The main point is that General Mutafchiyski in this meme has taken the body of Dwayne Johnson's character, i.e. Dr. Xander "Smolder" Bravestone. Those unfamiliar with *Jumanji* and its plot or cast would see only the muscular macho man and would attribute physical strength to Mutafchiyski which can account for his resilience and firm stand on all matters that require his expertise in fighting the virus. This naturally might be enough for the general public to understand the humorous remix of bodies.

What would be left implicit for those who would not be able to establish the link to *Jumanji* would be those other parallels that could be drawn between Mutafchiyski and Dr. Bravestone, whose body he has appropriated. As a start, Dr. Bravestone is a scholar, though in a different field, and he is also the leader of his group. In this particular part of the movie he is also on a quest to save one of his own team. So all these characteristics can be transferred to Prof. Mutafchiyski and the game referred to in the verbal element can be taken as a metaphor of the disease which is constantly evolving, just as the game of *Jumandji*, and offers the players, viz. the people, different levels which have to be won. Basically one has to win the game to survive, there is no other option. Transferred to the pandemic reality one has to find a cure and follow the necessary measures in order to survive the virus. Lack of knowledge of the movie would leave all these layers of meaning hidden to the recipient and would provide only a superficial taste of humor borne by the remixed image. Thus, it cannot be said that the non-verbal element is simply a background for the verbal one and is void of significance. On the contrary, it can be stated that in this particular meme the verbal element actually boosts the game metaphor and links the movie, the image of the general, and the pandemic reality in the month of May when the first wave of COVID-19 was over. The decisive look and posture of the General also contribute to the understanding of the idea of a leader determined to succeed, an idea that has been conveyed during various briefings of NOH.

The next memes also rely on the plots or characters of popular movies to convey the idea they carry, however, they might prove difficult to understand for some recipients.

You don't eat or sleep,  
you have dark circles  
under your eyes... I know  
what you are!

Say it out loud, Bella!

You are ... a fan of  
Mutafchiyski's and  
follow all his briefings



Figure 3. *Twilight*. Source: Facebook group "The General Said!"

The fans of the science-fiction type of movies about vampires and the possible relationship between a vampire and a human might easily recognise the images as taken from the plot of *Twilight* – a very popular teenage movie. Actually, this particular scene is part of the trailer of

the movie and has been shown quite frequently to stir interest. Thereby, provided recipients are familiar with the context, and thus able to place the scene from this first movie in the appropriate place, viz. the part where Bella, the human girl, realises what Edward, the vampire boy, is, they can easily relate the physical appearance of a vamp with their pale skin, and their sleepless nights, eating habits, etc., to the appearance of a human who has spent many sleepless nights waiting for the latest regulations or information on COVID-19 shared during the briefings of NOH. They can also establish the intertextual link to the original lines of the two characters and mediation in this case would be very small.

However, people who do not like such types of movies, and probably non-teenagers in general, would need more time to understand the comparison between a boy and a fan of Mutafchiyski's. Therefore, it can be stated that it will be difficult for this group of people to relate to the meme. Additionally, the reason why a teenager (Edward) would be so preoccupied with the virus would be difficult to explain. On the other hand, the fact that one would spare their own sleep in order to listen to these briefings also speaks of the popularity Mutafchiyski enjoys and refers to his increasing fandom (as discussed by Ilieva, 2021).

In meme [4] the aspect requiring more effort in decoding the meme is the mixture of English and Bulgarian cultural codes mostly through the use of English in the verbal element and a direct quote from the movie "I'm going on an adventure!" accompanying the image from *The Hobbit*.



A fine of 5000 BGN for you!!!

Figure 4. Bilbo Baggins vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group "The General Said!"

Recipients who are not well versed in English would not understand the quote, thereby the whole meme. People not fans of J. R. R. Tolkien's books and the movies based on them would not relate to the image either. It can be inferred that the meme would be fully understood by a small number of Bulgarians, who, similarly to the author/ poster of the meme, enjoy this type of adventure/ fantasy movie, are proficient, or at least understand English, and are familiar with the fine imposed at the time on people whimsically leaving their homes or the premises of their town/ city when under quarantine.

The mixture of codes can be explained with a trend observed by Mavrodieva (2021, p. 10) who states that the period of the first outbreak of the pandemic and the first lockdown is characterised linguistically with the continuous presence of bilingualism and digraphia, among other phenomena, which are exhibitions of intertextuality. The same trend of mixture of codes and transfer of linguistic items from English into Bulgarian media texts has been reported by

Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva (2021a; 2021b) in her analyses on neologisms in media language on COVID-19.

In this meme [4] the redeeming feature and the one that could save the process of communication is the expression on Bilbo Baggins' face which shines with excitement and bears the eager expression of one anticipating something interesting to happen to him. His posture and the position of his arms and legs are suggestive of a flight, a person running to someone or something (in Bilbo's case he is heading for an adventure with a company of dwarfs, a wizard, and a brave warrior). The latter would naturally remain implicit for recipients unaware of the movie but the communicative function of the meme would be achieved as the fine and the idea of prohibition are intertextually opposed to any attempt of movement outside particular borders as is mentioned above<sup>7</sup>. Fans of Tolkien, however, similar to the author of the meme, would be able to grasp the idea, thereby relate to it, more quickly and easily with all its layers of meaning.

The next memes use scenes from the popular *Game of Thrones* (GOT) series. We see General Mutafchiyski opposing even the White walkers:



C'mon, go right back.

Figure 5. White Walkers vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group "The General Said!"

This meme is also telling of the mixture of codes that would require higher processing ease (Todorova, 2015) when people are not fans of the genre or the series. The colloquial expression which is attributed to the General includes an abbreviated imperative word and a verb that is metaphorically used and has never been really uttered by Mutafchiyski. It is used to imply his authority over the White Walkers (as the people in the upper image are called) led by their maker and master the Night King and in an interdiscursive way relates this meme to the idea of the macho man whom no one dares oppose as promoted by meme [2]. In this particular case, the Night King is the ultimate evil everyone fears and considers invincible. Thus, this additional peculiarity of the image used in the upper part of the meme, further contributes to the idea of ultimate power associated with Mutafchiyski. The peculiarity of the expression attributed to the general can also be explained with the position of power he holds. It is people in authority and power who could look condescendingly on those perceived as their inferiors and use colloquial expressions when addressing them in order to appear close to them. And although using jargon or colloquialisms have not been noted in the speech of Mutafchiyski, that trend has been observed in some other Bulgarian politicians who try to appeal to the common people.

What *GOT* non-fans and illiterates miss on is the whole background of who the White Walkers really are and the whole dread and fear and hopelessness that these characters bring

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of another interesting meme using *The Hobbit's* poster see Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva (2021c)

with them due to the fact that they are able to wipe out the whole human race and bring total annihilation and winter. The White Walkers are basically immune to any conventional weaponry, save Valyrian steel and dragon glass (see also Burt, 2019). Metaphorically, the virus that wiped out such a big part of the population on Earth, with all its mutations and different strains and the failure to be kept under control, could be presented as the White Walkers' population. Prior to the vaccine, people had to resort to old fashioned ways of preventing the spread of the disease which is another possible reference to the way people handled White Walkers. All these nuances and parallels remain implicit for recipients who have not watched the series. The general idea conveyed through this meme is that the General is the utmost figure of authority who is not easily scared and would not wince from danger.

As stated above, the understanding of memes [4] – [11] (below) could be eased by the fact that at the time of the first wave of the pandemic there were multiple memes composed on the principle of juxtaposition between Mutafchiyski and a character or process in which the retort of the former usually came down to a prohibition of leaving the premises or the threat of a fine. Thus, basically, any ambiguity in this type of memes can be solved through the help of the general understanding of the group of memes featuring Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and the idea of obeying the imposed quarantine or else suffering the consequences of heavy fines. =

The same implicitness and hidden layers of meaning retrievable only by the most avid fans of the series are found in two more memes, featuring another very important character in the movie – Queen Daenerys I Targaryen.



I am Daenerys Targaryen, Stormborn, of the House Targaryen, Mother of dragons, The Unburnt, Queen of Meereen

Major General, Professor, military doctor Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Director at the Military Medical Academy (MMA), Head of the National Operational Headquarters for Fight with the Coronavirus Pandemic in Bulgaria, part of the Cabinet

What's with her

Figure 6. Daenerys (1) vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”





I am Daenerys Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Stormborn, The Unburnt, Mother of Dragons, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, Queen of the Andals and Protector of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros

I am Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Major General, Professor, Doctor of Medical Sciences, Director at the Military Medical Academy, Master of Health Management, President of the Bulgarian Board of the Balkan Military Medical Committee, President of the Balkan Military Medical Committee, President of the Bulgarian Military Medical Society, Member of the Board of the Scientific Society of Emergency Medicine, Deputy Chairman of the Bulgarian Surgical Society and Head of the National Operational Headquarters for Fight with the Coronavirus Pandemic in Bulgaria.

Off with the swagger, girlie!

Figure 7. Daenerys (2) vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

The two memes here are presented one after the other as their composition is similar. They both present a type of conversation between the two characters and while in the first one, i.e. [6], both of them are presented in such a way that they seem to be really talking to each other – Daenerys showing more passion, while the general looking more composed as becomes a man, in meme [7] it is the stares that they exchange that speak tons.

These two memes would definitely appeal to all *GOT* fans as the authors/ posters have truly skillfully picked to remix images that transmit the idea of a fight between egos and the strife in imposing one’s authority. Names, titles, and even nicknames, are important in history as they tell the life story and the achievements of their bearer. The most avid *GOT* fans might even be able to place the images within the movie and thus establish yet another intertextual link to the general message. The first image, i.e. in meme [6], is from Season 3 after Daenerys overthrows the Good Masters of Astapor and liberates all the slaves in the city. It can be said that at that point she is picking up speed in the goal of having a strong army behind her. The second image, i.e. in meme [7], is from the last season when Daenerys has almost completed her mission and achieved her goal to sit on the Iron Throne as the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. The shot is right after she has lost her best friend and trustee Missandei and has made her decision to burn King’s Landing down – the last of her conquests. The battles of Daenerys are similar to the one led by the general against COVID-19 – full of difficult opponents and unexpected hurdles.

Therefore, these two memes definitely present a clash of titans – a queen who has managed to have all seven kingdoms under her rule and a general who is adorned by more titles than one can imagine. Mutafchiyski actually has more titles than the Silver Queen and this characteristic was used to create the whole humorous effect in the memes. As can be seen in the verbal part of both memes the general exhibits condescension in his exchange with the queen simply because he is sure of his superiority. Similar to the discussion above, without the wider context

provided by the plot of the movie, the recipient would not fully grasp the significance of the exchange and would only take in the “overtrumping” between the two characters in terms of titles.

The fact that knowledge of a movie’s plot plays a significant role in the proper decoding of the meme is also visible in the following meme which is the only one in the corpus where the image of the general is placed in the upper part of the whole piece and creates the idea of vigilance. The position of the image of the general creates the impression that he watches over everyone and everything:



You two be careful what you are doing!

Figure 8. Mutafchiyski vs. Prison break. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

As can be seen the image is the same as the one used in meme [5], however, the difference is in its position and the verbal element attached. The warning “You two be careful what you are doing!” is addressed at two brothers, i.e. Lincoln Burrows and Michael Scofield, who are the main characters in the *Prison Break* TV series that was aired in the period 2005-2017. The reason for the warning becomes clear when we refer first to the title of the series and then to the plot. The key element here is the noun *break* used in the title. The series is about two brothers and the attempt of the younger one, Michael, to free his older brother – Lincoln, who is unjustly imprisoned. Using various methods, the brothers finally make it out of a heavily guarded dungeon. The expression on the faces of the two brothers in the shot from the series shows that they are up to something, i.e. breaking out from prison, so the author/ poster of the meme has appropriated that and transferred it to the pandemic reality when some people felt as if imprisoned and sought ways to break free. Thus, seeing the look on the faces of the brothers, the general utters his warning, suggesting that leaving one’s premises was not allowed at that time. Obviously the recipients who are unaware of the plot would stay only with the superficial understanding that the general is the authority that sees and knows everything, however, the nuances added by the plot would remain hidden.

Similar to movies, music is also subject to personal preference. Some people might like hard rock, others, pop, still others pop-folk or any other genre of music. Thus, creating a meme using one particular genre is a risky endeavor as the message might not be understood provided it reaches recipients who are not fond of that particular genre or are not familiar with the artist/singer.

The corpus of memes from the first wave of COVID-19 featuring General Mutafchiyski used a host of different singers both local and foreign who entered into a pretend dialogue with him. Similar to the memes featuring movies, mediation in the case of singers would be small if the recipient knows the artist that has been chosen for a particular meme.

Very few of the younger generation for example would be familiar with who Emil Dimitrov was or would be aware of the significance of the song quoted in the meme below:



Figure 9. Emil Dimitrov vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

The song “My Country, My Bulgaria” (in Bulgarian) is a confession of the love an immigrant feels for their home country and is therefore frequently sung by Bulgarian immigrants abroad. The song was written in 1970 in France at the birth of Emil Dimitrov’s son. All these emotions would remain hidden and the recipient would not feel the strong desire of the person to come back and would stay only at the explicit wish of someone to enter the country and the requirement for a quarantine that was imposed at the time. This probably is enough to sense the humor in the meme, but again, the deeper meaning of the song remains implicit.

And if memes featuring Bulgarian singers can be understood even though only at the semantic level in some cases, i.e. when the recipients cannot relate to the artist or the deeper meaning of the lyrics, what should we say about memes featuring foreign musicians and using English in their verbal part? They would naturally remain unclear to people who cannot relate either to the image or the language used. One such meme employs the image of the American band Offspring:



Figure 10. Offspring vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

The verbal element in the upper part of the meme is actually a quote from Offspring’s song “Come out and play”. The response attached to Gen. Mutafchiyski this time is actually the direct quotation of the opening verse of the same song. The humor in the meme would remain unclear to people who are not well-versed in English, while for those who are familiar with the language, but not with the group, it would be understood only at the semantic level associating the need



of social distance at the time of pandemic and the ban of going out. Probably the younger generation would not be able to relate to it as Offspring were popular some 20 years ago (the album *Smash* came out in 1994) among people who are now in their 40s or 50s. Thus, those who can understand the meme and make the reference to the punk rock band are a restricted number of Bulgarians in their forties or fifties or fans of this style in music who also know English very well and the lyrics of the song to match them. Here the author/ poster of the meme has not sought any deeper meaning as the message of the song is about racial difference, intolerance and the resulting acts of physical abuse and even death, which is something that the meme does not try to convey.

A similar strategy has been used in the creation of another meme featuring the very popular heavy metal singer Ozzy Osbourne. This time the quote under his image is from his song “Mama I’m coming home”.



Figure 11. Ozzy Osbourne vs. Mutafchiyski. Source: Facebook group “The General Said!”

The language used is again English in both parts of the meme and as the idea suggested by the title of the song is movement from one place to another, the response follows the measures imposed at the time for a ban on travel between towns in Bulgaria. Similar to [10] there are no hidden layers of meaning as the idea of the meme is to present the ban of travelling in a more interesting way and sets Gen. Mutafchiyski as the ultimate authority in the matter. The same observation made above can be applied here, namely, that the recipients who could fully relate to the message would be a restricted number of people (in their 40s and up) who know English and possibly know who Ozzy Osbourne is.

## 5. Conclusion

The examples used in this study unequivocally show that memes can sometimes be difficult to understand due to the hidden layers of meanings acquired by the intertextual references employed in their creation. People who cannot relate to either the non-verbal or verbal element for some reason would fail to understand the whole message as sometimes the decoding of that part requires broader knowledge.

Thus, the study has shown that the use of images from movies can sometimes prove problematic and demanding in terms of decoding as people have different tastes in movies and sometimes even though the author/ poster of a movie views one image as recognisable, thereby easily relatable, it might turn out that it is not so.

Images or even movie scenes provide additional layers of meaning that can expand on the message delivered only at the surface level of the meme and as shown in some cases, provide valuable parallels and metaphors that help grasp, even present pandemic reality in a more interesting and complete way. Therefore, it can be concluded that although in some other memes images might serve simply as background and do not add to the general message, with movie or song related memes that is not the case. In said two groups the time needed to establish the intertextual links involved is longer.

The study has also found that the mixture of cultural codes established through the use of English in the verbal part or foreign artists in the non-verbal element might also prove problematic as it would take people who are familiar with both cultures to understand the full message of the meme. This specificity probably comes to account for the existence of such a big number of music and movie related memes featuring a variety of local and foreign artists and a diversity of genres. In this way anyone can find a meme that would be relatable or through analogy with previously encountered memes from that same group, try to understand those that are not.

This is especially important in the digital world where information flows constantly and at a fast rate and content gets perused at a quicker pace than in the real world. Users do not spend that much time dwelling on topics, images or issues that would not grab their attention. In this line of thought, memes that are too demanding to decode would just be skipped and not reacted to and recipients will move to something easier to understand. On the other hand, such memes prove to be more interesting for analysis and research.

Another interesting observation made during this study is that memes are usually positive in terms of the image they put forward. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski in all of them is in his military uniform which coincides with the metaphorical presentation of the fight with the disease as a war. What is more, the General is also presented as the ultimate authority on all matters related to the pandemic and as the leader few dare to oppose. Thus, in the majority of the analysed memes he is presented in an explanatory mode usually giving orders for people, objects or even natural phenomena to stay home or not to come/ go out, praising them when they listen to him, or imposing fines when they misbehave. So, although people might not always be obedient and accept the measures imposed, they still follow the briefings and what Mutafchiyski has said and create through the memes the idea of an omnipotent leader who will protect his people in the fight against COVID-19. And the humorous twist in these bits of digital culture is there for people to be able to go through the trying period in an easier way.

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