Wenn-memes and the role of recipients in ellipsis reconstruction

Robert Külpmann

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

robert.kuelpmann@uni-mainz.de

German *wenn*-memes consist of a picture and a verbal part only consisting of a *wenn*-sentence which can be analyzed as an adverbial clause representing the protasis of a conditional relation. The second relatum, the matrix clause, realizing the apodosis, is omitted. According to Osterroth (2015), memes are language-image texts and thus complete textual units. From this it can be concluded that memes must contain all necessary information for recipients to be able to deduce the non-verbalized sequence themselves. Such *wenn*-sentences are not limited to memes, but are also used in tweets, headlines and emphatic exclamations. In my presentation, however, I will focus on the analysis of German *wenn*-memes.

Memes are characterized by the fact that they are mainly used in Internet-language contexts such as social media which put specific constraints on communication. These include that the communication partners do not necessarily have to know each other and therefore do not need to have any information about the context in which a meme is realized. As a consequence, a well-alligned common ground between all communication participants cannot be assumed when processing memes, and recipients of memes may differ significantly in the stocks of knowledge available to them, which they use to reconstruct the omitted relatum. Despite these challenging conditions, memes are usually easily understood. The question thus arises as to how this is possible.

In my presentation, I will argue in favor of an analysis that focuses on the recipients of memes. In line with Kehler (2002: 46), I will assume that this form of ellipsis is not about the omission and reconstruction of specific lexical material, but rather of a relatum of a discourse relation. This assumption is supported by the observation that in any case there are only a handful of potential reconstructions of the omitted relatum such as *So sieht es aus, wenn* ('This is what it looks like when'). However, these reconstructions share the property that they contain an indexical element such as *so*, which refers to content in the corresponding image. With reference to the question posed above, I will argue that when processing memes, recipients draw on all stocks of knowledge available to them, in order to be able to establish a coherent relationship between the information in the image and in the text.

References: • Kehler, A. (2002). *Coherence, Reference, and the Theory of Grammar.* Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications. • Osterroth, A. (2015). Das Internet-Meme als Sprache-Bild-Text. *Image* 22, 26–46.