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*Published in:*  
Cahier DD

*Publication date:*  
2024

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

#### [Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (HARVARD):*

Vandelanotte, L 2024, Performing point of view and multilingualism in multimodal discourse: The "POV" meme. in L Dumont & L Vandelanotte (eds), *Cahier DD: Multilingual mélanges voor Dirk Delabastita*. Presses Universitaires de Namur (PUN), Namur, pp. 71-80.

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# Performing point of view and multilingualism in multimodal discourse: The “POV” meme<sup>1</sup>

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For many online communicators, Internet memes – whether passively consumed or actively produced and shared – provide welcome comic relief and opportunities to vent a little. They are also rather intricate objects of study across a variety of disciplines (e.g. Shifman 2014, Milner 2016, Wiggins 2019), including linguistics (e.g. Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Lou 2017, Bülow et al. 2018, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018, Vandelanotte 2021). In this short contribution, I focus on so-called POV memes (where POV stands for “point of view”). The popular online repository of meme knowledge Knowyourmeme.com points out that these may also be referred to as “POV roleplay”, and suggests they may have originated on the short-form video sharing platform TikTok, “provid[ing] the viewer with an unusual perspective of a certain object during a specific interaction involving that object”.<sup>2</sup> An example of this original TikTok usage is a video clip accompanied by the text “POV: What my beauty blender sees when I’m in a hurry”.<sup>3</sup> In this video clip we see what we understand to be the camera being pressed rapidly, repeatedly and quite firmly against a young woman’s face; using the textual input we understand this to represent the viewpoint of the make-up sponge or “beauty blender” being applied in a hurried make-up moment.

As meme formats often do, this one too has travelled across to other social media platforms (Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, etc.), appearing not just in video form but also in other media forms: as static image-text combinations, but also in purely textual applications, without images. In many cases, the textual component contains a *you*-clause (“POV you are...”), imposing a (fictive) deictic structure (cf. Dancygier 2021) in which the meme viewer feels ‘involved’ in the scene, witnessing the viewpoint textually described. A good example of this default set-up in an image-text example is given in Figure 1. The “you”, fictively blended with the meme viewer, is the one being looked at by the nurse on the right, and is in the unfortunate position of a patient who unwisely “tried it at home” and now suffers the consequences, being wheeled along a hospital corridor on a hospital bed. “It” remains underspecified of course, but the clause “You tried it at home” metonymically indexes a situation in which, against the typical advice “don’t try

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<sup>1</sup> In offering this short essay in honour of Dirk Delabastita, I hope he will enjoy the fancy title, in which, in my mind’s eye, each lexically full item is asterisked and leads to a perfectly composed entry in the *Algemeen Letterkundig Lexicon*. More seriously, perhaps, the keywords in the title reflect a number of theoretical concepts which Dirk has taught or researched (or both), and combine it with the topic of memes, which in their linguistic and visual playfulness must surely appeal to the wordplay scholar in him.

<sup>2</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pov-memes>

<sup>3</sup> See the clip by TikTok user @symplisam, published on 3 May 2019: <https://www.tiktok.com/@symplisam/video/6686578594258373893>.

this at home”, “you” as a non-specialist, in a non-safe environment, decided to try something dangerous and ill-advised. Overall, then, with minimal text and a single static image, the meme object in Figure 1 develops a full narrative scenario of foolhardy experimentation at home gone wrong; medical intervention being needed; presumably an ambulance having been called; and you the patient now being rushed to the operating theatre.



**Figure 1.** “POV you tried it at home”

An example of a purely textual use is given in (1) below.<sup>4</sup> The example involves a use of so-called quote-tweeting, which involves ‘re-tweeting’ an existing tweet while adding your own tweet as a comment on the incorporated tweet in the space immediately above the ‘re-used’, quoted tweet (see Vandelanotte 2020). To distinguish these two communicative layers more clearly, I have enclosed the quoted tweet in (1) inside a box. Both the quoted and the quoting tweet are about the TV work of screenwriter Russell T. Davies (identified here as “RTD”). The quoted tweet (inside the box) dismisses Davies’ progressive credentials, but is in turn criticized by the quoting tweet, which counters that the conclusion offered in the quoted tweet could only be reached by someone who has never watched Davies’ output. Note that the quoted tweet itself is internally complex, in presenting a positive view of Davies first (in the form of a fictive quote, “rtd is one of the most progressive people in media”), and subsequently rejects this positive stance (“he’s just a white gay man who makes basically zero efforts to actually uplift minorities”), only for this rejection to finally be counter-rejected in the quoting tweet (“you have consumed literally none of RTD’s work or media”; in other words, you don’t know what you’re talking about).<sup>5</sup>

(1) @b\_\_nsky POV: you have consumed literally none of RTD’s work or media

@jaideallyce “rtd is one of the most progressive people in media” and he’s just a white gay man who makes basically zero efforts to actually uplift minorities

<sup>4</sup> A 13 November 2022 tweet published by the account @b\_\_nsky, quote-tweeting a 9 November 2022 tweet published by the account @jaideallyce; see: [https://twitter.com/b\\_\\_nsky/status/1591782337582624770](https://twitter.com/b__nsky/status/1591782337582624770).

<sup>5</sup> Another example of a text-based application of the POV meme is discussed in Greene & Schmid 2024.

In a rather subtle way, perhaps, (1) invites us to consider the extent to which examples of POV memes always deliver on what supposedly is their mission statement: is the quoted (boxed) tweet what you *observe* (i.e. what you see other people do/say from your vantage point of someone not well-versed in RTD’s work), or is it rather what you yourself say when you are in that case? It does rather seem that the quoting communicator of (1) uses the quoted tweet to *demonstrate* the kind of thing which non-connoisseurs of RTD’s work say, rather than to demonstrate what ‘the world’ looks like from such a person’s perspective, and in this sense one might argue that the POV mechanics are being used incongruently here. Visual examples often more clearly show this sort of ‘non-canonical’ use of the POV meme formula; one amusing example for instance features the text “POV you’re a labrador and you just found out you’re going to the beach”, while showing precisely a labrador who is finding out they’re going to the beach and displaying uncontainable excitement at the prospect.<sup>6</sup> As can be expected in such cases, at least one Internet user, commenting in a Reddit exchange prompted by this piece of shared media, pointed out “That’s not pov”.<sup>7</sup>

This comment already shows that among proficient meme users, there is a degree of awareness of norms around ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ usage of POV memes. An intriguing further illustration of this is given in (2),<sup>8</sup> which shows a quote-tweet of a tweet put out by President Joe Biden on 27 March 2024. In Biden’s tweet, a picture of himself and Vice-President Kamala Harris is accompanied by the text “POV: You believe health care should be a right, not a privilege, in America”. Presumably what Biden means is that Harris and himself believe this about health care in America, making this potentially an ‘unsuccessful’ use of the meme format.<sup>9</sup> The person quote-tweeting this, however, ironically pretends that “this is actually a correct use of POV”, because she is “the one who believes that, looking at two people who do not”. In this way, the quote-tweet insists on a ‘correct’ understanding of the format, blending herself as meme viewer of Biden’s tweet with the “you” of his tweet text, believing health care should be a right, while seeing two leading politicians whose policy actions she clearly believes do not do enough to really make health care a “right, not a privilege”. In this way, the quote tweet succeeds

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<sup>6</sup> This example was posted to the Instagram account *@shnootle.hound* on 29 March 2024; see: [https://www.instagram.com/shnootle.hound/reel/C5F-k2-i\\_eR/](https://www.instagram.com/shnootle.hound/reel/C5F-k2-i_eR/).

<sup>7</sup> See the user comment by Reddit user BackAgain123457 in the Reddit exchange at: [https://www.reddit.com/r/MadeMeSmile/comments/1brevur/what\\_are\\_we\\_waiting\\_for/](https://www.reddit.com/r/MadeMeSmile/comments/1brevur/what_are_we_waiting_for/).

<sup>8</sup> A 27 March 2024 tweet published by the account *@capybaroness*, quote-tweeting a 27 March 2024 tweet published by the account *@POTUS*; see: <https://twitter.com/capybaroness/status/1772989316433649892>.

<sup>9</sup> Arguably, a ‘correct’ interpretation is possible, if we assume a reading in which people who adopt the point of view stated ‘look to’ Biden and Harris for leadership on this issue. Nevertheless, the availability of a reading in which the thing stated in the “POV you are” text is in fact the viewpoint of the people depicted in the accompanying picture presents a kind of weakness or potential confusion, similar to the labrador example cited earlier.

both in making a kind of metamemetic joke, and in expressing criticism of perceived policy failures on the part of the President and Vice-President.

(2) @copybaroness this is actually a correct use of POV, because i am the one who believes that, looking at two people who do not

@POTUS POV: You believe health care should be a right, not a privilege, in America. [picture: Kamala Harris and Joe Biden]

Memes that are, at least partly, ‘about’ memes themselves (so-called metamemes), constitute quite a common subgenre of meme usage. An example of such self-reflexive usage pertaining to POV memes is exemplified in Figure 2, the text of which suggests the meme viewer is in fact a meme object (“you are the meme”) being viewed by the person depicted in the meme – in other words, the ‘actual’ meme viewer is now the meme, and the person depicted in the meme is now (fictively) the meme viewer. To complicate things further, consider Figure 3: here, one might argue, an effect is achieved that is similar to that of the POV meme in Figure 2, but without using the textual “POV” format. Instead, Figure 3 uses as its top text (“What if I told you”) a borrowing from another existing meme pattern (“Matrix Morpheus”, which uses a still from a scene in the film *The Matrix*). As its image, it rather cleverly uses the famous *Las Meninas* painting by Velázquez, thereby inscribing itself into the tradition of so-called ‘classical art memes’ (which are often *when*-memes; see Piata 2020). The painting is exceptionally well-suited to a meme thematizing the idea of viewpoint, given its unusual adoption of the perspective of the sitters for a portrait (reflected in the mirror at the back). The mirrored typography of the text further enhances the effect in which the meme viewer feels like the centre of attention – even though this seems contradictory as well on further reflection: the mirrored text could be taken to suggest that the text is meant for the “audience” of people in the room to read, which would reverse the perspective again, pushing them, rather than the meme viewer, into the “you” role. While the meme in Figure 3 does not, as such, fit the “POV meme” pattern, it clearly seems inspired by the meanings typically expressed by it; and in fact it is not uncommon for several memes to emerge expressing broadly similar meanings (for instance, two so-called ‘labelling memes’, the “distracted boyfriend” and “exit 12” memes, while using very different imagery, are both used to capture the idea of opting for an attractive alternative to a good option that was already available to you).



**Figure 2.** “POV you are the meme”



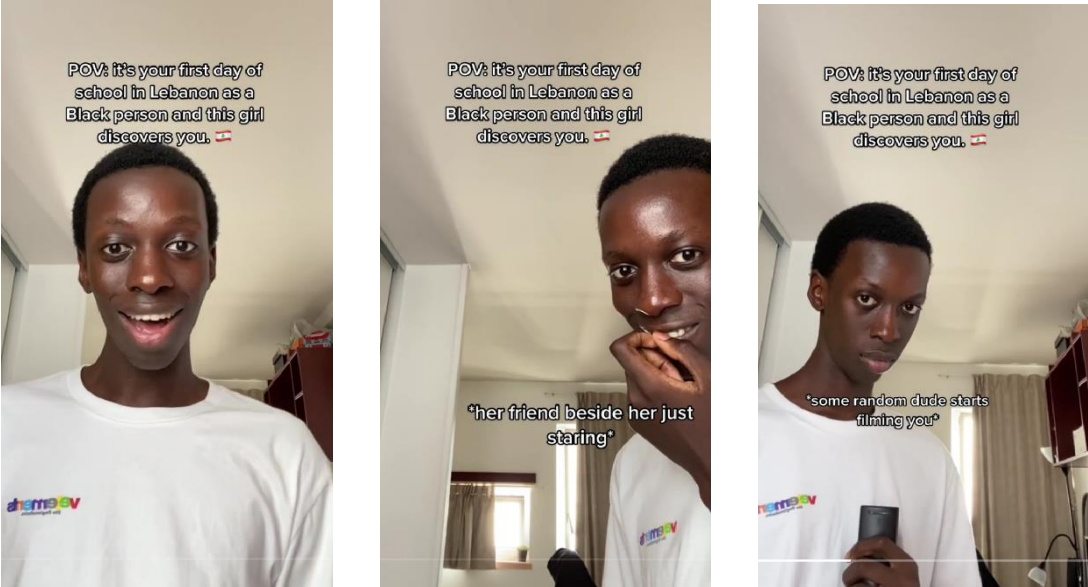
**Figure 3.** “What if I told you that you are the meme?”

Having introduced a number of uses and variants of POV memes, let us now return to the platform where the pattern appears to have first emerged – TikTok. Video offers the possibility of adding in further modalities to produce sometimes dazzlingly complex artefacts. One of my favourite examples, which I first came across in August 2022, is partly represented here in the stills in Figure 4, representing the main character position in (a), and two minor subcharacters, played by the same performer, in (b) and (c).<sup>10</sup> The transcript in (3) (expanded from the version in Blondin 2023: 21–22) does not transcribe the spoken language, but presents the sequence of on-screen text (maintaining the spelling and punctuation of the original), which is given in English throughout, whereas the spoken language switches between French and Arabic, thus producing a three-way multilingual artefact across audio and image.<sup>11</sup> The top text remains constant across the clip, whose duration is just over a minute and a half: “it’s your first day of school in Lebanon as a Black person and this girl discovers you” (followed by an emoji version of the Lebanese flag). The performer of the video embodies the girl at the Lebanese school,

<sup>10</sup> The video clip was posted to the TikTok account @itsniane on 8 August 2022; see: <https://www.tiktok.com/@itsniane/video/7129578519784393985>.

<sup>11</sup> The on-screen text captures most of the spoken language, though there is occasionally an interjection or short phrase that did not make it into the captions (e.g. Arabic *anjad* ‘really’ or *kiff* ‘cool’, or at the very end the sign-off “bye... byyye!”).

addressing the meme viewer, who is blended with the role of the Black person. At the same time, we as viewers can interpret the blend and understand that the Black performer’s lived experience is likely what is being acted out in the video: while he is playing the role of the Lebanese school girl, presumably he was originally the new Black kid at school being addressed by her. The performer briefly takes on further roles in the short clip: at a few points, he takes up a position to the right of the image (b), embodying, as the on-screen text between asterisks clarifies, “her friend beside her just staring” (who, at one point, also interacts with further friends, assumed to be off-screen further to the right); at one other point, we see him on the left hand side (c), playing the role of “some random dude” who “starts filming you”. In this way, the viewable space is effectively divided into three embodiment spaces, allowing the same performer to play the three roles: the central character of the school girl in the middle; the excited and fascinated friend on the right hand side, and the dude who starts filming on the left hand side.



(a) (b) (c)  
**Figure 4.** “POV: it’s your first day of school in Lebanon as a Black person”

Across the duration of the video clip, as the transcript of on-screen text shows, only the school girl’s side of the dialogue is given (in addition, in one brief turn, the right-hand character’s address to further off-screen friends is presented). There is intrinsically no way to include the responses and reactions on the part of the “point of view” (the Black kid on his first day at a new school), but consistent with the pretence of a re-enactment of one side of the exchange, gaps are left in the performance to allow time for the unspoken replies to questions such as “what is your name” or “where are you from”.

- (3) On-screen text of the TikTok POV meme in Figure 4 (with added information in square brackets)

**[permanent top text for the whole duration of the TikTok video; the line ends in a Lebanese flag emoji given here as 'LB']**

POV: it's your first day of school in Lebanon as a Black person and this girl discovers you. LB

**[main character in spoken French, to camera]**

hiiii

how's it going??

what's your name?

wow, your name is so nice.

**[right-hand character]**

\*her friend beside her just staring\*

**[main character in spoken French, to camera]**

where are you from?

Senegal?? ... i'm from Ivory Coast, you know?

my dad was in Ivory Coast.

**[right-hand character]**

\*looking at your outfit\*

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

you speak arabic??

**[main character in spoken Arabic, addressing right-hand character]**

he speaks arabic 🤔🤔

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

why didn't you say that in the beginning??

**[right-hand character in spoken Arabic, to others off-screen]**

"he speaks arabic, come see"

**[main character in spoken French, to camera]**

you're speaking Arabic... woww

**[left-hand character]**

\*some random dude starts filming you\*

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

oh, you lived in Syria??

oh, you were born there??... woww

**[main character in spoken Arabic, addressing right-hand character and others]**

guys, he speaks arabic!! 🤔

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

what does your dad do?

does your mom work?

**[main character in spoken French, to camera]**

what grade are you in?

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

wait, why am I speaking french?

(in arabic) what grade are you in?

i really love black people, I swear, i really do.

your skin color is so beautiful

**[main character in spoken French, to camera]**

i don't really understand racism, i swear.

i don't understand it.

**[main character in spoken Arabic, to camera]**

if anybody says anything to you, come to me okay??

i'll have words with them.

don't be scared.

okay, i'm going to go to class and i'll see you later.

The extensive acting out of (one side of) a typical kind of dialogue to characterize a situation straddles the boundaries of Internet memes and acting (or perhaps even stand-up comedy). Nevertheless, the meaning of POV memes is central to a more complex artefact such as this; and conversely, despite its longer form and multiple layers, this example exploits similar tools to more 'basic' examples of the meme, such as 'fictive' interactions (Pascual 2014), embodiment and blending. The overall meaning of the artefact may be difficult to pinpoint exactly, and will likely be different depending on viewers' beliefs and sensibilities: from a comical realization of what it is like to be "othered" as a new person in a new context, to a more uncomfortable sense of being fetishized for the colour of your skin (all in the name of antiracism), this impressively complex example allows of different shades of irony. As a performance of point of view and multilingualism in a short piece of multimodal discourse, it represents a veritable *tour de force*.

A series of examples that combine the use of the TikTok platform, and the 'idea' of a POV meme without necessarily using the token phrase "POV you are" (seen earlier in Figure 3), is provided by the performer on the *@louisiiiofficial* TikTok account, who takes an existing song and imagines it sung from another perspective. The typical pattern for this audio version of POV memes is this: the performer introduces the song, both in speech and in the on-screen text, with the words "so, you know the song that goes...", and follows this up by singing a very short extract from the original song. Next, he continues by saying (and writing on screen), "what if that were written from the other perspective". In one example that borders on the absurd,<sup>12</sup> he starts from what is apparently a known misheard lyric, "a potato flew around my room" (where the original, in Frank Ocean's song "Thinking Bout You", actually starts with "A tornado flew around my room before you came...").<sup>13</sup> He then sings, while accompanying himself on the piano, to the tune of the original song, a fanciful lyric (in this case: "I was growing in the ground just waiting for the rain... and then something amazing happened to my skin..." and "you

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<sup>12</sup> The video clip was posted to the TikTok account *@louisiiiofficial* on 29 September 2022; see: <https://www.tiktok.com/@louisiiiofficial/video/7148800971236314373>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/a-potato-flew-around-my-room> for further background.

just think of me as French fries”). While this example is part of a whole series, not all examples stay so true to the concept of viewpoint reversal, and quite often the pattern is used to introduce a *different*, rather than strictly an *opposite* perspective – for instance, rewriting the song “Barbie” by Aqua from Oppenheimer’s perspective (in a context where there were popular films of both in the cinemas), or imagining lyrics to fit the tune of George Michael’s song “Careless Whisper” to provide quite a scathing critique of twice-sacked Conservative minister Suella Braverman and her anti-immigration rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

The range of examples discussed has, I hope, given some idea both of the basic meaning and use of the original “POV meme” pattern, and of its creative extensions across different types of platforms, modes and modalities. No discussion would be complete in the present context, however, without turning to two final examples, given in Figures 5 and 6, which allow us to apply the theory to a new and promising picture series featuring a certain Dirk Delabastita. I will leave it to him to decide to what extent the examples apply the meme pattern successfully, and interpret his behaviour correctly.



Figure 5. “POV you see your Eng lit prof find his true calling”



Figure 6. “POV you’ve upset Santa”

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<sup>14</sup> See the videos at: <https://www.tiktok.com/@louisiiiofficial/video/7260499188348243227> and <https://www.tiktok.com/@louisiiiofficial/video/7301776632904256800>

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