

PERFORMING STANCE THROUGH MEMESPEAK IN SENATOR FATIMA PAYMAN'S PARLIAMENTARY SPEECH

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana memespeak—ragam bahasa yang dipengaruhi oleh budaya meme internet—digunakan untuk menyampaikan sikap komunikatif dalam pidato Senator Australia Fatima Payman pada tahun 2024. Dengan menggunakan kerangka stance triangle dari Du Bois (2007), studi ini menganalisis ekspresi seperti “goofy ahh government,” “mid,” dan “sigma” untuk menunjukkan bagaimana Payman mengevaluasi lawan politik, memosisikan dirinya sebagai politisi yang melek digital, dan menyelaraskan diri dengan subkultur anak muda yang terlibat aktif di ruang daring. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa memespeak bukan sekadar bahasa gaul generasi muda, tetapi juga strategi retorik yang digunakan untuk mengkritik ideologi dominan, membangun identitas politik alternatif, serta menciptakan solidaritas simbolik dengan komunitas digital. Dengan menempatkan memespeak sebagai perangkat pengambilan stance yang strategis, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada diskusi mengenai wacana politik digital, performativitas identitas, serta peran strategis bahasa informal dalam ruang institusional formal seperti parlemen. Studi ini menekankan potensi memespeak dalam merekonstruksi norma-norma ekspresif dan memperluas bentuk legitimasi dalam komunikasi politik kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: memespeak, stance, pidato politik, identitas digital, Du Bois

Abstract

This study examines how memespeak—a linguistic register shaped by internet meme culture—is used to perform communicative stance in a 2024 parliamentary speech by Australian Senator Fatima Payman. Drawing on Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, the study analyzes how expressions such as “goofy ahh government,” “mid,” and “sigma” enable Payman to evaluate political opponents, position herself as digitally fluent, and align with youth subcultures. Rather than trivializing parliamentary discourse, her use of memespeak reconfigures it to connect with digitally native audiences. The findings reveal that memespeak serves not merely as generational slang but as a rhetorical strategy for enacting critique, signaling political identity, and building symbolic solidarity with younger demographics. By framing memespeak as a stance-taking device, this research contributes to emerging discussions on digital political discourse, identity construction, and the evolving role of vernacular language in formal institutions. The study underscores the strategic potential of memespeak in reshaping the expressive norms of political communication.

Keywords: memespeak, stance, political speech, digital identity, Du Bois

INTRODUCTION

The communicative practices of Generation Z and Generation Alpha have evolved significantly with the growing influence of digital culture, particularly through the language styles shaped by internet memes. One notable development is the emergence of memespeak—a linguistic register rooted in meme culture and commonly found on platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit. Characterized by irony, exaggeration, and context-dependent references, memespeak includes expressions like “gyatt,” “mid,” and “skibidi,” which function as both

humorous commentary and social signaling. This study understands memespeak as an extension of what David Crystal (2003) conceptualizes as **netspeak**—a hybrid form of language emerging from online interaction. Yet, while netspeak broadly captures the features of digital communication, memespeak refers more specifically to culturally coded phrases embedded in meme circulation, making it a compelling site for examining identity performance in institutional settings.

The diffusion of memespeak into broader public discourse reflects a wider linguistic shift driven by participatory media environments (Shifman, 2014;

Vásquez, 2022). As digital platforms normalize playful, ironic, and subculturally marked forms of communication, memespeak increasingly functions not only as a stylistic device but as a marker of in-group belonging and generational identity. This evolution becomes particularly significant when expressions originating from internet culture appear in political discourse, as seen in the September 2024 speech by Australian Senator Fatima Payman (Parliament of Australia, 2024). By incorporating phrases such as “goofy ahh government” and “sigma,” Payman brought youth-coded digital language into the institutional setting of Parliament—an act that was as culturally resonant as it was politically unconventional.

Senator Fatima Payman, elected in 2022, made history as the first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to serve in the Australian Senate (Payman, 2022). Known for her vocal advocacy of youth empowerment and multicultural inclusion, Payman has embraced digital media as a key tool in her political communication strategy. Her September 2024 parliamentary speech, which included memespeak expressions like “gyatt” and “Fanum tax,” sparked widespread discussion on both social media and mainstream news platforms (SIX News Australia, 2024; Payman, n.d.). While some commentators praised her approach as innovative and relatable, others criticized it as inappropriate or lacking in professionalism. Nevertheless, the speech represents a unique rhetorical moment in contemporary politics—one in which internet-derived language enters institutional discourse in order to engage digitally native constituents.

Her speech holds importance not only for its linguistic novelty but also for its symbolic positioning. As a young woman of color and the daughter of Afghan refugees, Payman represents intersecting identities that are often marginalized in formal political institutions. Her rhetorical decisions disrupt traditional expectations of parliamentary speech and signal a deliberate effort to connect with audiences typically excluded from formal political discourse. Rather than functioning merely as comic relief or generational slang, her memespeak-laced rhetoric becomes a political act—one that challenges existing hierarchies and demands new tools for analyzing how identity and ideology are performed through language (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Van Dijk, 2003).

More broadly, this study intervenes in emerging discussions about the shifting nature of political voice in the digital age. As institutions face growing pressure to remain relevant to younger, digitally literate populations, language becomes a key site through which authority is negotiated (Crystal, 2003; Vásquez, 2022). Memespeak is not merely a linguistic curiosity; it is a cultural response to the alienation often felt by youth in relation to elite

political discourse. By bringing culturally embedded expressions into Parliament, Payman is not only signaling generational solidarity—she is also helping to redefine what counts as legitimate political communication. In this sense, memespeak operates as both a rhetorical and ideological strategy: it reclaims space for youth identity within formal discourse, while challenging conventional norms of appropriateness and power.

At the same time, the intersection of digital culture and institutional language raises broader questions about linguistic legitimacy. In many formal settings, internet-influenced language is still dismissed as trivial or incoherent (Shifman, 2014). Such assumptions, however, overlook the pragmatic functions memespeak can serve—particularly in cultivating affective connection, cultural recognition, and strategic ambiguity. Its playful surface often conceals complex positioning acts, enabling speakers to critique, align with, or distance themselves from dominant ideologies without relying on traditional rhetorical forms (Du Bois, 2007).

One reason memespeak holds rhetorical value is its ability to encode layered meanings. Through irony, absurdity, and intertextual referencing, it allows speakers to express critique or alignment without direct confrontation. This ambiguity can be politically useful: it diffuses risk, softens dissent, and creates messages that resonate differently across audience groups. For a politician like Payman—young, Muslim, female, and often under heightened scrutiny—such language may serve as a low-risk strategy to subvert dominant narratives while maintaining plausible deniability.

Rather than treating memespeak as slang or stylistic noise, this study approaches it as a communicative act loaded with interactional meaning. Memespeak operates not only at the lexical level but also as a resource for performing social identity and speaker positioning. In this light, Du Bois’s (2007) stance triangle offers a useful analytical framework to understand how Payman’s linguistic choices construct relations with political opponents, imagined audiences, and ideological communities.

In contemporary political discourse, stance-taking has become a critical means for constructing authenticity and relatability—especially for younger politicians operating across hybrid media platforms (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The strategic expression of evaluation, alignment, or distance enables them to project political values, social affiliations, and rhetorical identities. In this sense, stance is not only about how politicians speak—it is about how they perform who they are. In Payman’s case, memespeak enables a form of stance that is generationally fluent, culturally resonant, and

ideologically distinct from traditional parliamentary decorum.

Although scholars have examined memes as tools for engagement, satire, and digital identity (Shifman, 2014), much of this research focuses on online user content. What remains underexplored is how memespeak—as a register of digital-native expression—is mobilized strategically by politicians in formal contexts. This study responds to that gap by treating memespeak not as linguistic residue from internet culture, but as an active rhetorical tool in political performance. While it may appear trivial on the surface, memespeak allows politicians to simultaneously address multiple audiences: youth voters, online communities, political institutions, and media observers.

To explore these dynamics, this study draws on Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, which conceptualizes stance as a triadic act of evaluation, positioning, and alignment. The speech is analyzed through qualitative digital discourse analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Vásquez, 2022), focusing on how memespeak functions across these components. The theoretical model is supported by Limor Shifman's (2014) memetic framework, which classifies the viral origins and genres of memes, and Van Dijk's (2003) political discourse theory, which situates linguistic strategy within broader ideological and institutional contexts.

By analyzing memespeak as a strategic form of stance performance, this study contributes to growing scholarship in digital linguistics and political discourse analysis. It demonstrates how language once dismissed as ephemeral or unserious now functions as a powerful means of constructing identity, signaling solidarity, and transforming institutional rhetoric. In doing so, it offers new insight into how culturally resonant language reshapes the boundaries of legitimate political speech in the digital age. To explore these dynamics, the present study focuses on two central research questions: (1) *What communicative stances are performed through Senator Fatima Payman's use of memespeak in her September 2024 parliamentary speech?* and (2) *How does memespeak function as a strategic rhetorical tool for performing evaluation, positioning, and alignment within institutional political discourse?*

METHOD

This study adopts a **qualitative digital discourse analysis** approach to explore how memespeak is used to perform communicative stance in formal political speech. Designed as an interpretive and descriptive inquiry, the research focuses on the contextual meanings embedded in linguistic choices within a real-world political setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Vásquez, 2022). The

primary source of data is a speech delivered by Senator Fatima Payman in the Australian Parliament on September 11, 2024—a moment that drew widespread public attention due to its unconventional use of memespeak and its disruption of parliamentary rhetorical norms (Parliament of Australia, 2024).

The unit of analysis centers on the memespeak expressions embedded in the speech. Rather than applying a statistical sampling model, the study utilizes a purposive sampling technique, selecting specific excerpts that include notable memespeak phrases such as “goofy ahh government,” “gyatt,” “sigma,” and “Fanum tax.” These expressions were chosen based on their cultural salience and their potential to reveal stance-taking mechanisms within formal discourse (Shifman, 2014).

To gather data, the researcher transcribed the speech manually from video coverage published by SIX News Australia, an independent media platform known for its youth-focused reporting (SIX News Australia, 2024). The transcript was then cross-referenced with the official parliamentary Hansard to validate structure and content, although many informal expressions were absent from the official record (Parliament of Australia, 2024). To interpret the meaning and social significance of the memespeak terms, supporting references were drawn from **KnowYourMeme.com** and digital archives that document the evolution, popularity, and contextual usage of meme expressions. These resources functioned as interpretive tools for decoding the cultural background and communicative intent behind each expression (Shifman, 2014; Vásquez, 2022).

The analytical lens of this study is grounded in Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, which conceptualizes stance as a triadic process involving **evaluation**, **positioning**, and **alignment**. Each memespeak expression was treated as a stance unit and examined for how it conveyed speaker attitudes toward political topics, constructed ideological positioning, and signaled alignment or disalignment with target audiences. This framework is complemented by Shifman's (2014) memetic theory, which helps categorize the genre and viral pathways of the memes involved, and Van Dijk's (2003) political discourse theory, which situates these communicative acts within broader ideological and institutional structures.

Given the qualitative nature of the research, the researcher acted as the primary analytical instrument, applying theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity throughout the process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). No direct interviews or informants were involved, as the study focused solely on the textual and performative aspects of a single speech event. Validity was addressed through triangulation, using video footage, transcription, and

memetic references to cross-check the cultural and discursive significance of the analyzed expressions. This process ensured interpretive credibility and contextual grounding, particularly in decoding the nuanced, multilayered meanings of youth-coded language within formal political rhetoric.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes how memespeak in Senator Fatima Payman's 2024 parliamentary speech performs communicative stance. Guided by Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle, each memetic expression is examined in terms of three interrelated acts: *evaluation* of a target or issue, *positioning* of the speaker's identity, and *alignment* with (or disalignment from) imagined audiences or ideologies. Rather than treating memespeak as mere generational slang, this analysis explores how it functions as a strategic linguistic resource for political critique, identity construction, and cultural affiliation.

Senator Fatima Payman's deployment of memespeak often functions as a satirical tool for political critique. In one particularly striking example, she remarks:

1. Evaluation: Memespeak as Political Appraisal and Ideological Critique

Evaluation involves expressing judgments or attitudes toward political actors, ideologies, or institutions. In Payman's speech, memespeak allows for compact yet pointed political assessments that bypass traditional formal language. One illustrative moment appears when she declares:

"The decision voters will be making in a few months time will be between a mid government, a dogwater opposition or a crossbench that will mog both of them."

These phrases—"mid," "dogwater," and "mog"—are rooted in online gaming and meme culture, where they serve as shorthand for mediocrity, failure, and dominance, respectively (Shifman, 2014). Rather than engaging in formal debate, Payman reframes political evaluation through humorous, youth-coded language. This maneuver allows her to undermine the credibility of both major parties while elevating the crossbench—her political affiliation—as a superior alternative.

Another form of evaluation surfaces in her critique of performative governance:

"They yap non-stop about how their cost-of-living measures are changing lives for all Australians. Just put the fries in the bag, lil bro."

Borrowed from customer-service memes, the phrase conveys frustration with empty rhetoric and demands concrete outcomes (Crystal, 2003). Through this cultural shorthand, Payman frames political inefficacy in relatable, digital-native terms.

Her evaluation also takes an ironic, absurdist tone:

"They must have brain rot from watching too much Kai Cenat and forgot about their plans to ban social media for kids under 14. If that becomes law, you can 'forgor skull emoji' all about watching Duke Dennis or catching a dub with the bros on Fort."

The exaggerated references satirize policymakers' digital illiteracy and suggest that such legislation is not just misguided but culturally alienating (Shifman, 2014; Crystal, 2003). In these examples, memespeak sharpens ideological critique by transforming serious concerns into generationally attuned commentary.

2. Positioning: Constructing a Politician through Digital Identity

Positioning refers to how speakers construct social identity and relational stance through discourse. Payman uses memespeak not only to critique others, but to portray herself as a digitally fluent, culturally aware, and politically unconventional figure.

This intention is clear in her address:

"To the sigmas of Australia, I say that this goofy ah government have been capping, not just now but for a long time."

Here, she assumes the voice of an insider speaking directly to a digitally literate cohort. By invoking "sigmas"—a recontextualized meme term associated with self-assurance—and combining it with "goofy ah government" and "capping" (lying), she positions herself as someone who speaks from within the vernacular logic of youth discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Vásquez, 2022).

Her statement:

"I would be taking an L if I did not mention the opps who want to cut WA's gyatts and services tax."

further positions her as a creative reinterpreter of digital language. Here, "L" (loss), "opps" (opponents), and "gyatts" (humorously reimagined as economic resources) allow her to signal both political loyalty to her constituency and a strategic embrace of digital culture (Shifman, 2014). Rather than diluting her message, the

use of memespeak enhances her voice as a crossbench advocate unafraid to defy convention.

In her closing line:

“Though some of you cannot yet vote, I hope that, when you do, it will be in a more goated Australia for a government with more aura.”

Payman positions herself as a visionary political figure. Here, “goated” (greatest of all time) and “aura” (charisma or presence) project values of excellence and inspiration through digital lexicon. These positioning acts cultivate a progressive image grounded in affective resonance and aspirational rhetoric (Du Bois, 2007; Van Dijk, 2003).

3. Alignment: Solidarity, Belonging, and Audience Inclusion

Alignment concerns how speakers negotiate their relationship to others—whether with constituents, ideologies, or institutions. Payman’s memespeak performs alignment with marginalized youth voices, digitally immersed publics, and voters excluded from dominant political discourse.

Her alignment with young, digitally fluent citizens is evident in:

“To the sigmas of Australia...”

This phrase does more than identify a demographic—it signals shared culture and solidarity. Similarly, in referencing “Kai Cenat,” “Duke Dennis,” and “catching a dub,” she includes her audience within a web of digital references that reaffirm community bonds.

Even seemingly absurd lines, such as:

“Forgor skull emoji”

create alignment through shared meme literacy. To outsiders, the phrase may appear nonsensical, but for those in the know, it encodes cultural affinity and belonging (Shifman, 2014).

Memespeak also enables alignment with broader frustrations:

“Just put the fries in the bag, lil bro.”

This phrase, understood by many through customer-service memes, aligns Payman with digitally savvy voters who demand efficiency over posturing (Crystal, 2003; Vásquez, 2022). It offers a shared language of dissatisfaction, validating youth expectations in political life.

Her closing expression of optimism:

“...a more goated Australia for a government with more aura.”

extends alignment to future voters, acknowledging their importance before they even enter the electorate. By addressing the politically unrepresented, she affirms their cultural and political significance through the language they speak (Van Dijk, 2003).

By organizing the findings according to Du Bois’s (2007) stance triangle, this section demonstrates that memespeak in Payman’s speech is not incidental or frivolous. Instead, it serves as a complex semiotic tool for performing political critique, crafting identity, and cultivating relational ties with youth constituencies. This layered use of language challenges assumptions about the seriousness of internet discourse, showing how digital vernaculars can meaningfully reshape the contours of institutional rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how memespeak functions as a stance-taking resource in Senator Fatima Payman’s 2024 parliamentary speech. Drawing on Du Bois’s (2007) stance triangle, the analysis revealed that memespeak expressions enabled Payman to enact complex communicative moves through evaluation, positioning, and alignment. These linguistic performances allowed her to critique political opponents, affirm cultural and generational identities, and express aspirational visions for governance—all within the rhetorical frame of digital youth vernacular.

Rather than serving as mere slang or comic relief, memespeak in Payman’s speech functioned as a deliberate rhetorical tool. It provided her with a discursive mode to critically evaluate dominant political narratives, position herself as both culturally fluent and politically distinct, and align with digitally literate youth audiences who often feel alienated by conventional political discourse. In doing so, Payman demonstrated how subcultural language can be strategically mobilized in formal settings to challenge decorum, assert authenticity, and build solidarity.

By embedding memespeak within institutional discourse, Payman disrupts expectations of parliamentary speech and expands the expressive possibilities available to contemporary political actors. Her stance-taking, filtered through the lexicon and aesthetics of internet culture, illustrates how digital linguistic repertoires can reconfigure what political speech looks and sounds like. This study thus affirms the rhetorical legitimacy of memespeak as a communicative resource in modern

politics—one capable of negotiating generational divides, amplifying identity performances, and reimagining the language of political engagement.

SUGGESTION

While this study has illuminated how memespeak enables stance performance in formal political discourse, further research is needed to expand and deepen this line of inquiry. Comparative studies involving other political figures who use memespeak—or similar digital vernaculars—across varying cultural and institutional contexts could offer broader insights into the versatility of such stance strategies. Additionally, audience reception analysis, particularly through interviews, surveys, or social media discourse analysis, could reveal how these stance performances are interpreted by target demographics and whether they effectively foster identification or skepticism.

Future research might also consider how memespeak functions across multiple platforms, examining how stance is constructed differently in formal settings like Parliament versus informal ones like TikTok or X (formerly Twitter). Multimodal and cross-platform approaches could shed light on how politicians manage authenticity and alignment across divergent communicative registers. Lastly, longitudinal studies may help track how the rhetorical value of memespeak evolves in response to shifting digital cultures, platform affordances, and political climates.

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