

A comparative linguistic analysis of internet memes in English, Polish and Ukrainian: specifics, functions and language means



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Abstract The present study centers on the examination of the structure and nuances of Internet memes as exemplars of verbal communication. Its objective is to depict and scrutinize Internet memes chosen by theme as linguistic manifestations of sociopolitical and cultural significance. Additionally, the paper aims to investigate the interrelation between the visual and textual elements within the meme. The principal hypothesis posits that Internet memes encompass a range of linguistic devices that aid in constructing the semantic framework of the message and ease the identification of embedded cultural cues. The research methodology is comprehensive, employing descriptive techniques, analysis and synthesis, tools from the comparative method, and surveys of respondents. The study's findings indicate that the structure of Internet memes is fragmented, yet adequate in forming a comprehensive array of meanings, which are also shaped through linguistic mechanisms. Furthermore, this assertion holds true across all three languages analyzed. Future investigations into the cultural and social components of memes, explored through verbal expression using metaphor theory and structural anthropology, can enhance our comprehension of meme creation dynamics and the foundation of its widespread appeal.

Keywords: internet meme, cultural code, metaphor, metonymy, semantic frame, communication.

1. Introduction

Internet memes are a viral and widespread phenomenon in the online space. Accordingly, memes have a wide range of constructions, and language means that support them. Moreover, they have certain key features that are intended to determine their specifics. Multimodality has been studied in groundbreaking studies from the standpoint of metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), semantics and concept theory (Fauconnier, 1997), and structural linguistics (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Majdzińska, 2013). Internet memes are marked by a wide range of topics, constructions, and language tools. The cultural codes represented in memes are also important, as well as their ease of perception, open structure, and ability to circulate widely and quickly. The popularity of memes and their widespread distribution make them a great subject for scientific research in various fields of knowledge.

2. Literature review

From the linguistic perspective, memes are an exciting and promising research object, as they combine two aspects in a specific way: a verbal and a visual one. Visual perception needs to actualize linguistic units at the meme level (Kwiatkowska, 2011, 2013). Therefore, it is worth considering the linguistic and visual components of memes from this perspective, as well as grouping them by topic, shape, size, etc. (Langacker, 1987, 2008). Linguists should pay special attention to stylistic devices such as metonymy and metaphor. The latter are the means of conceptualizing the content of Internet memes. The language and the image correlate in the meme structure, complementing each other to form a whole image. This is precisely the reason why the question arises as to whether it is worth analyzing the text separately from the image. Currently, memes are already a common part of the Internet space.

Nevertheless, linguists should pay attention to them. However, there is also an opinion in linguistic circles that memes are incredibly dynamic, easily changeable, and not stable. Thus, it is difficult to find permanent positions that define the content and features of this linguistic and cultural phenomenon.

In Ukrainian humanitarian studies, memes are analyzed from several perspectives. First, a meme is seen as a tool of information warfare, a source of disinformation, which is effective due to its pace, ease, and nonauthorship (Pidkuimukha, Kiss,



2020). Memes are studied as mass media content representing the realities of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Ivanova et al., 2022). Additionally, memes and messages are considered a phenomenon of political influence that is hidden behind an entertainment form (Ostanina-Olszewska, Majdzińska-Koczorowicz, 2019; Petrenko et al., 2022). A particular interest is represented by studies that consider the meme as a linguistic phenomenon and the specifics of its perception by the audience, as well as its pragmatic aspects of creation and transformation (Dean, 2019; Akimova et al., 2022).

Some studies have been devoted to the linguistic dimensions of memes to describe and analyze their formation and evolution as one of the new cultural and political social dominants in the global artistic and media space (Wooten, 2020). The author identified innovations of genre, stylistic, and ideological nature, a new look at memes as a way to enrich the expressive means of verbal and nonverbal level, as well as a cultural tool of postmodernism.

In the future, memes should be considered in terms of two dimensions of the stylistic system. This includes the diachronic and synchronic aspects. Moreover, this approach becomes especially relevant in comparative studies that focus on two or more languages. It is also worth considering the peculiarities of using creative methods of meme creation in different social contexts and discourses (Levytska et al., 2022; Mia et al., 2022).

A meme can be seen as a discursive practice, a system of media and entertainment industry techniques. A declaration of meanings through the creation and functioning of memes, which generally have a persuasive, explanatory, and entertaining nature, is not only a linguistic given. They are a synthetic combination of language, culture, art, and social influences.

3. Methods

The linguistic approach to the phenomenon of Internet memes primarily involves a comprehensive approach. This is how the complex and multidimensional nature of memes, as well as their correlation with the axiological and emotional components of the mental order of consumers of this product, will be taken into account.

The theoretical material needed the use of the descriptive method, analysis, and synthesis. The method of interdisciplinary research helps to identify several specific features of memes. The possibilities of interpretive methodology, where the text is thought of as a complex synthetic unity, were also considered.

The choice of content for analysis was made from Polish, Ukrainian, and English-language websites. Among the main research methods is the structural method. It was employed to present the meme as an integral functional unit. This unit was inventoried by its main properties and stylistic features, where all the constituent elements are correlated. Meme as a product of linguistic creativity and the social life of a person can be examined within the framework of interdisciplinary research. It can be used to identify the main sociocultural features and priorities, as well as to determine creative potential and status. In this way, the mechanism of additional meaning, stylistically labeled and immersed in culture and politics, becomes apparent. The semantic and stylistic method was used to identify the stylistic sources involved in the formation of meme texts and images and to determine their intentions and emotional range. Additional contexts and extralinguistic situations that determine the content and comic component of memes require further interpretation of the context and historical specificity of the meme.

The study also presents survey data on the specifics and features of memes as objects of linguistic analysis. For this purpose, the authors used the survey method. The survey involved 63 first-year (bachelor's) students of Khmelnytsky National University, Department of International Relations and Law. The research team interviewed respondents majoring in philology and focusing on linguistics, literary studies, and the history of language. In addition, several topics on memes were introduced into these educational programs at the level of several educational components. The research team collected and analyzed the results of the survey.

4. Results

The specificity of internet memes at the communication level lies in this particular type of communication, as well as the transmission of emotions and information through text and images. In the contemporary internet space, memes are perceived as a fact of political, societal, and cultural life.

An essential function of internet memes is to highlight current issues and events in a satirical or humorous light. Within the journalistic sphere, memes serve the purpose of critique, providing additional commentary, popular entertainment, and a tool of propaganda.

The multimedia nature of memes is grounded in the multimodal type of communication that coexists in the modern world. Some researchers consider memes as a current version of comics, caricatures, satirical posters, etc. Memes are often structured as bimodal (image + text), but the sound and the animation can also be used in meme creation. This expansion of communication methods and channels allows us to speak of the multimodal nature of internet meme structures.

Mememes are products of collective work. They result from a syncretic perspective on authorship and a synthetic product from the standpoint of communication resource involvement. Mememes are most often not created by a single person, although there are individual author mememes. Most of them undergo transformations and lose their authorship.

First and foremost, the duality of mememes is defined by the presence of a template, most often an image or a visually thematic group. However, it can be accompanied by standardized structured dialog. The linguistic component is most

frequently subject to change. Thanks to the availability of internet-based software and templates, they are widely accessible on the internet.

These are universal templates representing the globally popular topic of cats, as well as specifically Eastern European and Ukrainian templates. From a structural standpoint, the linguistic message takes the form of a dialog between two people, where one person continues the conversation in the form of a statement, a question, and an echoing response.

Meme of Figure 1C is politically charged and satirical. It has a complex sentence that is a statement of the situation. The important thing is that in Ukraine, the cat Stepan is a popular, well-known character, a famous blogger from Kharkiv who has his own history and beliefs. The text also references two prominent political figures, Ramzan Kadyrov and Stepan Bandera. The actualization of the cultural and political code assumes that the audience understands who Kadyrov is and which Stepan is being referred to.



Figure 1 Ukrainian memes about the war.

Anonymous people can become meme authors and commentators of reality. The most important thing is how close this comment is to the audience in its form and content. All it takes is to create a dialog according to the proposed structure. Figure 2 shows the structure of "top text - bottom text."

If we turn to the most popular memes in Poland, they are mostly political in nature. Such memes are dedicated to Polish politicians of the highest rank. The meme "Słychać wycie. Znakomicie?" ("Can you hear the howling? Great!") with the leader of the opposition party Civic Platform is based on the idea of Donald Tusk's typical behavior and his contemptuous attitude toward the ruling party PIS. Tusk's standard tactic was to ask the audience a question (which fits the structure of the meme). It fits into the cultural code of Poles' perception of this politician's behavior. The actual dialog presented in the monologue is one of Tusk's favorite stylistic devices. These memes address the emotional side of an average Pole's perception of a given situation. In this case, the text is the priority, and the image complements it, illustrating certain emotions shared by many Poles.



Figure 2 Polish memes with political content.

The authors of memes in Polish use images of various top politicians in their memes.

Any Internet user can be an author of meme texts. The constantly reproduced graphic visual image is essential and permanent. Thus, the verbal part becomes a variable component in this verbal-visual duality. The popular image has its own connotations and dictates the rules for the formation of the textual component. The text may differ from the main template in a couple of words.

English-language examples can illustrate the sociocultural sound of memes. English-language memes are the most widespread because of the English language's status as an international language. They can be found all over the Internet. Now, let us look at memes on sociopolitical topics and the texts they represent. The meme under the common name "Boyfriend

meme" (Figure 3c) represents a well-known image with a typical behavioral scenario where the text plays a prominent role in the semantic order. These are identifying signatures of the participants in the situation.

In addition, the typical dialog in the meme also carries a satirical meaning, exposing the policy of the American president and his low intellectual level. The metonymically presented image of the president (in the form of a doll) and the dialog from this perspective begin to be perceived as a comic sketch. It shows Trump's dismissive attitude toward North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, as well as the American president's arrogance and rudeness in general.

The meme in Figure 3a is generally distinguished by the use of internal hyperbole, where the tradition of scary costumes and treats on Halloween is presented as a situation with citizens' fears of real estate taxes. The very cultural scenario of "frightening" on Halloween and the dialog with the "witch" on the holiday seem typical. However, the costume of the "real estate tax receipt" on the boy adds emotions and the status of social satire to the image and text.



3a



3b



3c

Figure 3 English-language memes of sociopolitical content.

A survey among students majoring in linguistics was part of the study to define the concept of "meme" in terms of its specifics. Such a survey is valuable because it can show the way memes are transformed by genre, technical, and content features of memes in the media space of the youth. The survey was conducted among 63 first-year (bachelor's) students of Khmelnytsky National University, Department of International Relations and Law. As part of the initial courses in linguistics, literary studies, and language history, sections on memes and their role in the modern language environment were introduced at the level of several educational components. Additionally, some aspects of memes in linguistic analysis were revealed. The results of the survey are presented in percentages.

As seen, students' understanding of the "meme" concept changes depending on their age and academic level. The first-year students' definition of a meme as a funny picture is represented by 70% of respondents, while the fourth-year students also think of memes as a source of information (45%) and a funny picture (45%) (Table 1). The decrease in the number of people who perceive memes as entertainment by 25% is a significant indicator of a professional approach to memes as an object of linguistic research. It is worth noting that memes were an essential source of relevance for all respondents. It was expressed in support of memes and their perception by 93% of all respondents and the belief that the audience is entirely tolerant of meme culture.

Table 1 Some aspects of the memes' linguistic analysis (specifics, source, and tolerance to memes).

Year of Study	Definition of the term "meme"	Source of memes	Tolerance to memes
1	Funny pictures (70%) Cultural phenomenon (16%) Jokes (14%)	Everywhere (72%) Social media (8%) Bloggers (meme authors) (20%)	100% yes
2	Funny pictures (68%) Cultural information units (24%) A snapshot of reality (8%)	Everywhere (66%) Social media (20%), Traditional media (14%)	95% yes 5% no
3	Funny pictures (62%) Source of information (32%) A snapshot of reality (6%)	Everywhere (76%) Themed pages in electronic media (16%)	87% yes 4% no 9% other
4	Funny pictures (45%) Source of information (45%) Audiovisual content (10%)	Everywhere (78%) Social media (18%) Bloggers (4%)	90% yes 10%, depending on the context

Source: compiled by the authors.



The respondents' sources for viewing and using memes varied depending on the grade level. The understanding of memes as an all-encompassing phenomenon is supported by students of all years of study, with an average of 73%. This indicates the influence of meme culture on students' vision of linguistic processes that take place in the digital space of social media and are used as part of communication and culture. In addition, the relevance of this topic was undeniable for all respondents. It was expressed in the support of memes and their perception by 95% of all respondents, as well as the belief that the media space is covered by meme culture.

5. Discussion

The experience of conducting surveys of students majoring in linguistics as part of a pedagogical experiment is quite common in Ukrainian higher education. The need to be flexible, as well as always open to new opportunities and new skills, is part of professionalism's core position. Therefore, the attitude of future specialists to the problem of creativity, changeability, and text creation seems very important (Sokolova, 2012; Zinenko, 2018).

This study is a logical continuation of a series of surveys conducted by researchers at Ukrainian universities among students of linguistics, law, and journalism (Synorub, Medynska, 2019). According to the scientists, the versatility of memes as an entertainment genre was declared by 95% of all respondents. They identified the relevance of this topic for research and development, and the respondents recognized meme culture as a component of the modern global media space. According to researchers of websites that present collections of memes, this form of content transmission is improvised. It lacks authorship and can be presented as a spontaneous joke (Ivanova et al., 2020). First, some memes have authorship. For example, one of the GONI Memes webpages has an author - a DJ from Rivne, Mykhailo Yurchuk (Micik Gonibez). Therefore, it is possible to talk about professional approaches to meme creation along with an improvised, unattributed corpus of memes.

Currently, a meme can be described as a complex, multilevel construction that can influence how society sees the world and a person, which starts to "unpack" through a meme. A meme encourages people to think creatively and to convey thoughts and wishes through various forms of analogy or adjacency between different elements of culture, society, and the modern world.

6. Conclusions

Currently, a meme is a product of a modern type of thinking and the possibilities of digital media. In this respect, memes can be perceived as a "linguistic carnival," "language game," and "parody" of real-life problems, contexts, and cultural codes. The postmodern way of conveying an acute social context through text and images concisely and briefly, with irony and comedy, allows us to reveal the specifics of the modern world and the nature of creative techniques of text construction. The linguistic analysis of memes involves an integrated approach, the use of an interpretive methodology, where a meme can be presented as a cultural and linguistic concept that is semantically and emotionally multivariate.

Memes are fragmentary and integral in content and form. They are versatile regarding the possibility of constant transformations and restructuring of the semantic framework. The language in Internet memes is also fragmentary and scene-by-scene. Thus, a meme can represent a series where one template provides many variants. The specificity of the Internet meme is also the multimedia context where a meme and its transformations are presented.

The creative component of the meme and the ability to constantly change make it possible to enrich and develop the meme as a phenomenon of language and culture. From the linguistic perspective, a meme results from the personal experience of a nominal author who interprets the world in the language categories.

Ethical considerations

I confirm that I have obtained all consent required by the applicable law to publish any personal details or images of research subjects, or other individuals used. I agree to provide the Multidisciplinary Science Journal with copies of the consent or evidence that such consent has been obtained if requested.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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