

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series9.2024.27.06>

UDC: 81:32]:004.77

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POLITICAL INTERNET MEMES: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Bibliographic Description:

Semenyshyn, O. (2024). Political Internet Memes: a Linguistic Perspective. *Scientific Journal of Mykhailo Dragomanov State University of Ukraine. Series 9. Current Trends in Language Development*, 27, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series9.2024.27.06>

Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon of memes, which are a controversial aspect of modern communication, the subtleties of which have not yet been studied. The analysis of language material shows that the combination of verbal and non-verbal components of memes creates an autonomous information entity that is capable of self-reproduction of the representation of a linguistic personality at the phonetic, lexical, grammatical, cognitive and pragmatic levels in political discourse. In this realm, the concept of the “political internet meme” emerges, denoting a specialized form of political discourse that combines visual and verbal components to sway an audience into the realm of political communication. These memes combine traditional political terminology with colloquial vocabulary strategically designed to achieve persuasive goals. Generally, political internet memes are created through affixation and the use of simplified grammatical structures without articles, often intentionally including spelling and grammatical errors to increase their impact.

In pursuit of a comedic effect, the creators of political Internet memes use a whole arsenal of stylistic and linguistic means. These include complex wordplay involving phonetic and morphological manipulations, various expressive techniques, and playful experiments with typography and punctuation. Thanks to such means, memes go beyond the simple transmission of information, turning into powerful tools of political expression and persuasion.

Keywords: *internet meme, political internet meme, internet communication, creolization, and linguistic play.*

1. Introduction.

In the modern world, communication, including internet communication, has become an essential component of our everyday lives. Using the internet, we often engage in real-time interactions, but there is a phenomenon where elements of internet communication actively influence our ordinary life processes and spread rapidly. This phenomenon is known as internet meme. Internet memes consist of verbal and non-verbal elements that carry cultural value and have the property of rapid dissemination through the internet. Memes are an important element of internet communication, and their study is relevant and necessary given the limited amount of research dedicated to them, the dynamics of linguistic means of their verbalization, as well as their significance within the national-cultural context of a

particular country and in the context of globalization as a defining factor in human development.

Internet memes can be considered as one type of precedent phenomena. Precedent phenomena are capable of conveying information about a text or event in cultural or historical context in a short form, and therefore they have a special type of connotation called cultural connotation. The presence of cultural connotations ensures the possibility of identification of the precedent phenomenon by the recipient. Reproduction of cultural connotations and certain associative connections is a necessary condition for achieving the desired communicative effect.

2. Literature Review.

Internet communication, as a process, remains insufficiently researched, a consequence of the dynamic nature of virtual interaction, which spawns new linguistic units. These innovations demand immediate attention from linguists, as the structure of internet communication is constantly evolving. Among the studies dedicated to internet communication, it is important to note the contributions of D. Crystal and S. Herring. Multimodal and creolized texts have been the subject of research by scholars such as B. Balaz, M. Barke, J. Bateman, T. Biletska, D. Bordwell, O. Havryliuk, I. Gambie, I. Harbar, H. Gottlieb, J. Deloz, K. Jevitt, D. Eytzen, R. Kalinichenko, D. Makaruk, I. Pavlovska, H. Smith, S. Topachevsky, J. Wilfuer, T. Hippala, L. Cherniuk, and others. Memes as informational units have been the subject of research by R. Dawkins, D. Dennett, T. Deacon, H. Chik, and others. Internet memes have been studied by V. Bil, S. Blackmore, J. Glick, M. Zhulinska, S. Zaitseva, O. Sadlovska, N. Smolyar, K. Sokolova, O. Chernikova, and others.

3. Aim and Objectives.

The aim of the research is to comprehensively study and describe the linguistic nature of English-language political internet memes and the mechanisms of creating comedic effect within them. To achieve this goal, the following tasks need to be addressed:

- 1) define the specificity of interpreting the concept of “political internet meme”;
- 2) analyse the role of verbal and non-verbal components of political memes;
- 3) analyse the collected corpus of political internet memes and describe their linguistic features.

4. Methodology.

Theoretical and methodological foundations of the research were based on the fundamental principles of sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics, as well as contemporary achievements of Ukrainian and foreign researchers in the field of structural analysis and description of discourse constitutive features. The study involved the use of a complex of methods. A descriptive method was employed to describe political memes. Componential analysis was utilized to determine the semantic characteristics of political memes, and a comparative method was applied to compare memes and identify their main features. Content analysis of these media units was also conducted during the study for systematic description of meme content.

5. Results and Discussion.

“Meme” is one of the most relevant functional units in virtual communication. Coined by English biologist R. Dawkins in 1976, before the advent of the Internet, to describe units from which culture is formed and which can “replicate”, the term has since evolved. In contemporary science, a meme is defined as a unit of popular culture that spreads, imitates, and transforms by individual internet users, creating a collective cultural experience. Memes serve as significant elements of digital culture, greatly influencing the formation of thinking patterns, behaviours, and actions of social groups.

Modern researchers sometimes expand the concept of memes. For instance, J. Gleick notes that throughout human history, the existence of memes has been fleeting, but now they become long-lasting and can be stories, recipes, skills, legends, etc (Gleick, 2011 URL: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com>). Generally, the definition of a meme often corresponds to classic sign criteria, where a meme is considered a linguistic sign and an element of a semiotic system or code. This aligns memes closer to idioms or fixed expressions (Peirce, 2009). Like any sign, a meme contains three main components: a symbol, a definition, and a meaning (signified).

The pragmatics of memes are provided by text (verbal memes), images (non-verbal memes), or a combination of text and graphics. Most researchers consider the primary function of memes to be entertainment, but they also verbalize psychological, ethical, political, and everyday issues. Memes serve various functions, including informative, self-identifying, expressive, evaluative, and others.

The pragmatics of memes also involve establishing intercultural communication. The use of English as a language of international communication allows for the exchange of memes among users from different cultures, contributing to global internet culture. Often, memes are created in English due to its international status, and through globalization, they swiftly cross national and cultural boundaries.

Linguistic features of memes include:

- temporal unrestrainedness: a meme can include contemporary demotivators, witty phrases, quotes from famous individuals, idioms, and more;
- presence of more information than meets the eye: a meme refers to an entire situation, and the sum of words does not always correspond to its meaning;
- evolution of memes over time: the form of a meme may remain, but the concept of the situation may disappear;
- fixity of meme form, which can transform situationally;
- conscious transformation of meme form to create antithesis or adaptation to similar situations.

In written discourse, semiotically complex texts are encountered, which combine verbal and non-verbal components. Such textual forms are known as creolized texts, which include linguistic elements and elements of other sign systems. An internet meme, as one of such forms, consists of a verbal part (text) and an iconic part (image). In linguistics, a political internet meme is considered a complete linguistic work of political communication, utilizing both visual and verbal means of expression. These memes can be seen as internet users' reaction to political events and are often used to reinforce political influence, especially due to the visual effect that effectively impacts the audience's subconscious. Such memes have tremendous potential in political discourse and are actively used to promote various political goals.

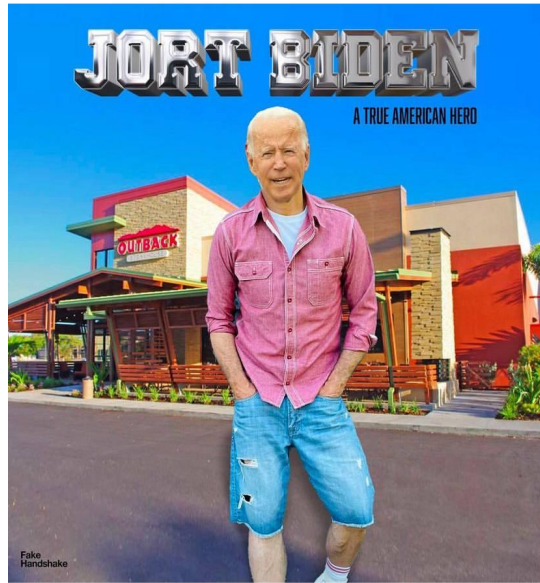
Internet memes can be seen as a way of expressing political opinion, akin to a platform where one can freely express themselves. Since the authorship of internet memes is anonymous, political opinions expressed in them are free, without shame, and may even include the use of prohibited language, in the form of ridicule or insult. Often in political internet memes, vivid expressive means are used. In this case, the traditional use of such means for aesthetic effect gives way to the use of various images, metaphors, comparisons, and other elements for the sake of grotesque, satire, and absurdity. A parallel can easily be drawn between a political internet meme and a political anecdote. They are united by anonymity, comic direction, the ability to express something prohibited or indecent, and, ultimately, a kind of folkloric nature, that is, belonging to folklore.

Internet memes can be considered not only as a means of expressing political opinions but also as a unique form of political protest in modern society. The ability to express political beliefs through internet memes indicates that memes possess an ideological direction, with their creators aiming not only to express their own political views but also to influence other internet users through the artistic elements of memes such as expressive images, metaphors, wordplay, etc. When discussing the political potential of internet memes, it is important to note another significant aspect: internet memes serve as indicators of political sentiment, showing how popular or unpopular a particular politician is.

An analysis of texts of selected internet memes has revealed that a distinctive feature of English-language political internet memes in terms of lexicon is the widespread use of neutral vocabulary. This is because texts of political internet memes are aimed at a mass and heterogeneous audience, hence words like *answer, come, look, go, want, sound, know* are commonly employed. The use of neutral vocabulary in political texts makes them more accessible and understandable. Additionally, the analysed political internet memes are filled with a significant amount of professional political terminology, such as *elections, votes, debate, republicans, democrats*. The quantitative ratio of the use of neutral vocabulary to professional political terminology is 75.2% to 10.3%. The texts of political internet memes also incorporate vocabulary from colloquial everyday speech (slang) to enhance expression, establish rapport with the audience, and create a comfortable conversational atmosphere, for instance: *guy, thug, dude, bro, sis, gotta*.



In political communication, anthroponyms (names of political figures, names of peoples, nations) and toponyms (countries and geographical objects) play a significant role. An analysis of political internet memes has shown that authors of this type of creolized text often use the following: names of political figures from various countries (*Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren*); names of cities, states, countries (*Washington, USA, Great Britain, America*); names of nations.



Analysing English-language political internet memes from a linguistic perspective, it is also worth paying attention to the primary methods of forming political vocabulary in this type of creolized text.

1. Suffixal method. High derivational activity in political vocabulary is represented by suffixes: -ist, -ism, -ization, -tion, -ness, -en, -er, -acy, -ant, -less, -ive, -ful, -ible/able: *development, modernization, strengthen, improvement, relationship*.
2. Prefixal method. Regarding the prefixal method of vocabulary formation, some of the most used prefixes are: inter-, re-, and co-: *international, internship, reorganization, retell, cooperation*.

During the analysis, it became clear that the linguistic structure of English-language internet memes on political topics is primarily built through suffixal formations (with a frequency of usage of 72.2%), rather than prefixal (only 27.8%). Moreover, suffixation is more characteristic of nouns and adjectives. These parts of speech are most commonly encountered in the verbal component of a meme.

At a grammatical level, in the English-language political internet memes we examined, numerous stereotypical openings were identified, shaping a distinct style for

political internet texts and providing them with structure and recognizability. These openings, whether individual words or syntactic constructions, typically appear at the beginning of the verbal part of the meme and are often separated by commas from the subsequent context. They usually serve the role of syntactic and semantic links between individual text fragments, such as *however, it is not yet known, after all, therefore, although, even though*.



The grammatical component of political internet memes texts is usually simplified. The textual part of the meme predominantly consists of simple sentences, omitting articles, deliberately distorting spelling, and containing a number of grammatical errors. Furthermore, the analysis of political internet meme texts allowed the identification of the following characteristic groups of verbs:

- 1) verbs representing the process of discussing political life and issues and making decisions regarding them, for example: *propose, suggest, discuss, consider*.
- 2) verbs expressing certainty, hope for a quick resolution of political problems, for example: *think, improve, hope, be sure*.
- 3) verbs and their impersonal forms conveying the meaning of political influence on opponents and the political situation in general, for example: *insist, putting pressure on*.

In most of the analysed political internet memes, printed text is used. The use of printed font in formatting the verbal component is justified by its function as a commentary. The role of printed font often constitutes the author's explicit intention to impart a "serious tone" to the message, express their particular evaluative judgment through commentary, provide formality, and minimize or even neutralize the author's presence in the text. In most English-language political internet memes analysed in this study, accompanying captions are

formatted in uppercase letters. Such formatting of the verbal component of the meme immediately attracts the user's attention. However, it is worth noting that in creating political internet memes, authors sometimes resort to using different font sizes. Increasing the font size allows emphasizing a particular word or even phrase, giving them emotional colouring or highlighting the main content of the phrase. By reading the phrase and increasing the tone of voice on the enlarged font, the recipient can more realistically model the emotional component of the original situation.

When it comes to the font colour in English-language political internet memes, it is usually simplified and minimalist (white or black, occasionally bright colours like yellow), selected for contrast against the background: white font is used on dark or colourful backgrounds, while black font is used on light backgrounds. This colour choice aims to create contrast between the text and the image. In most analysed memes, vibrant images serve as backgrounds, drawing attention to the colour of the graphic image. Therefore, the font colour in these images is mostly white with a black outline. However, in internet memes where the graphic image is framed by a dark border, the text is rendered in white on the frame.

Phrases in political internet memes are typically divided into multiple parts. The most popular division is splitting the phrase into two parts: the first part is presented at the top, and the second part at the bottom of the picture. It can be observed that the text of phrases is divided in half according to several criteria: based on content, for example, the top of the picture presents the setup of a situation or phrase, and the bottom provides the resolution, as well as based on intonational drawing (there is a pause in speech). It is also worth noting that an important paralinguistic component in the creation of political internet memes is the facial expressions of characters in the graphic images. This non-verbal component most often establishes a connection between the verbal and visual elements of political internet memes.

6. Conclusions.

A meme represents one of the most intriguing, highly controversial, and less explored phenomena in modern communication. It is characterized by specific linguistic forms and unique functioning features. A contemporary meme can be described as an informational unit capable of self-propagation. Its peculiarity lies in preserving the meanings it has acquired previously without losing new ones.

Recently, some linguists have been considering internet memes as modern proverbs, carrying cultural information and reflecting typical life situations. They exhibit the following characteristics: the use of scientific terms to create a comedic effect, linguistic play that simultaneously creates and destroys stereotypes, intertextuality, thematic directionality, and untranslatable wordplay. Internet memes are a relatively new object of study in linguistics. They deserve attention as they actively influence the formation of Internet language, which is rapidly evolving. As a mass phenomenon, these creations require attention and detailed analysis.

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Бібліографічний опис:

Семенишин, О. І. (2024). Політичні інтернет-меми: лінгвістична перспектива. *Науковий часопис Українського державного університету імені Михайла Драгоманова. Серія 9. Сучасні тенденції розвитку мов*, 27, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.31392/NPU-nc.series9.2024.27.06>.

Анотація

Стаття присвячена аналізу феномену мемів, які є суперечливим аспектом сучасної комунікації, тонкощі якого ще не вивчені. Аналіз мовного матеріалу показує, що поєднання вербальних і невербальних компонентів мемів створює автономну інформаційну сутність, яка здатна до самовідтворення репрезентації мовної особистості на фонетичному, лексичному, граматичному, когнітивному та прагматичному рівнях політичного дискурсу. У цій сфері з'являється концепція “політичного інтернет-мему”, що позначає спеціалізовану форму політичного дискурсу, який поєднує візуальні та вербальні компоненти, щоб схилити аудиторію у сферу політичної комунікації. Ці меми поєднують традиційну політичну термінологію з розмовною лексикою, стратегічно розробленою для

досягнення переконливих цілей. Як правило, політичні інтернет-меми створюються за допомогою афіксації та використання спрощених граматичних структур без артиклів, часто навмисно містять орфографічні та граматичні помилки, щоб посилити їх вплив.

Для створення комічного ефекту творці політичних інтернет-мемів використовують цілий арсенал стилістичних та мовних засобів. До них належать складна гра слів із фонетичними та морфологічними маніпуляціями, різноманітні експресивні прийоми та грайливі експерименти з типографікою та пунктуацією. Завдяки таким засобам меми виходять за рамки простої передачі інформації, перетворюючись на потужні інструменти політичного вираження та переконання.

Ключові слова: інтернет-мем, політичний інтернет-мем, інтернет-комунікація, креолізація та лінгвістична гра.