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MEMES AS AN OBJECT OF LINGUOSTYLISTIC ANALYSIS

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The development of digital technologies and social media has led to the emergence of new forms of communication, one of which is the Internet meme. Memes have become an integral part of the contemporary media space and are actively used by individuals to convey information, express emotions, evaluate social phenomena, and create humorous effects. Today, Internet memes attract the attention not only of cultural scholars and sociologists but also of linguists, as they possess a complex linguistic structure and significant communicative potential.

Modern researchers consider the Internet meme a special type of media text combining verbal and visual components. The term meme originates from the Greek word mimesis ("imitation") and was first introduced in 1976 by the English biologist Richard Dawkins in his popular science book The Selfish Gene. Dawkins defined a meme as a "unit of cultural information" and argued that, just as biological information consists of genes, cultural information consists of memes. According to Dawkins, these cultural units are transmitted from one individual to another through copying and imitation, drawing an analogy with Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory [1, p. 87]. Memes function as multimodal texts in which meaning is created through the interaction of images, linguistic units, and cultural context.

An Internet meme represents a unit of online communication that spreads rapidly among users due to its relevance, emotional expressiveness, and ability to evoke associations. A meme may exist in the form of an image, text, video clip, or a combination of these elements. The visual component of a meme serves either to reveal the meaning of the verbal element more fully or to alter its connotation entirely by creating a new interpretation. Such creolized texts are capable of being deeply embedded in human memory and subsequently assisting in the decoding of similar texts [1, p. 90].

A distinctive feature of Internet memes is their ability to be replicated, transformed, and adapted to various communicative situations. From a linguistic perspective, a meme is regarded as a polycode text combining verbal and non-verbal means of communication. The textual component often serves as the key to interpreting the image, while the visual component enhances the pragmatic effect of the message.

From the standpoint of media linguistics, memes constitute a special genre of Internet discourse characterized by brevity, expressiveness, intertextuality, and a high degree of cultural conditioning. Frequently, the central figures of meme-based media texts are objects that attract attention through their appearance, such as cats, dogs, and children, all of which evoke positive emotions and facilitate audience engagement [1, p. 93].

One of the most characteristic features of Internet memes is language play. Comic effects are often achieved through puns, homonymy, violations of language norms, unexpected lexical combinations, and transformations of fixed expressions. Common devices include paronomasia, occasionalisms, deliberate spelling mistakes, transformations of phraseological units, and the blending of different functional styles. Language play contributes to the creation of additional meanings and enhances textual expressiveness.

Another important characteristic of memes is their expressiveness. To strengthen emotional impact, meme creators actively employ colloquial and substandard vocabulary, emotionally colored words, interjections, and graphic means of expression such as capitalization, letter repetition, and emojis. These elements help convey the author's attitude toward the depicted situation and shape the audience's emotional response.

M. Krongauz identifies several stages in the life cycle of Internet memes as communicative units: meme creation and initial reaction, meme dissemination, meme usage, and meme decline or status transformation. Most memes originate from absurd, unusual, or extraordinary situations, phrases, songs, film scenes, or video clips. They often emerge on forums, social networking sites, and websites. If a meme captures users' interest, it quickly gains popularity and enters the online mainstream. During the dissemination stage, which Krongauz calls the "creative zone," the meme undergoes modifications and expands into new communicative contexts.

The next stage is characterized by relative stability, during which the meme circulates throughout the Internet and remains in active use. However, no meme is immune to disappearance. Changing trends and declining user interest eventually render many memes incomprehensible to newer audiences. At the final stage, a meme either fades away or becomes integrated into everyday language, functioning no longer as a meme but as a communicative and speech element [1, pp. 95–96].

Intertextual connections play a significant role in the structure of Internet memes. Many memes are based on quotations from literary works, films, songs, television programs, political speeches, and elements of popular culture. Understanding such memes requires the recipient to possess specific background knowledge.

Precedent phenomena constitute one of the key mechanisms underlying meme creation. Memes frequently incorporate precedent names, texts, situations, and statements that undergo reinterpretation and transformation to produce humorous effects. Internet memes are multifunctional phenomena reflecting both general tendencies in digital communication and the specific features of meme culture. They combine journalistic and colloquial styles, employ slang and jargon, make use of verbal devices such as alliteration, rhyme, puns, and language play, and demonstrate a predominance of entertaining functions. Additionally, some memes perform educational functions through their specialized content [5, p. 82].

Intertextuality ensures the multilayered semantic structure of memes and facilitates their dissemination within particular cultural communities.

Internet memes perform several communicative functions: informative, evaluative, entertaining, identificational, and manipulative. Their role is particularly evident in socio-political discourse. Due to their brevity and emotional intensity, memes can rapidly shape public opinion and influence perceptions of social phenomena.

Modern memes function as instruments of social reflection, enabling users to express attitudes toward current events, political processes, and cultural trends.

The following examples illustrate the use of Internet memes:

1. Language Play. Meme: An image of a tired student. Text: "Me: Today I'm going to bed early. Also me at 3 a.m.: reading an article about the origin of Old Russian reduced vowels."

This example employs antithesis ("going to bed early" versus "at 3 a.m."), creates an effect of self-irony, and uses the colloquial construction "Also me" as a marker of Internet discourse.

2. Precedent Text. Meme: An image of a movie character looking thoughtfully into the distance. Text: "To be or not to be? That is not the question. The question is whether to submit my term paper today or tomorrow."

This example transforms a precedent quotation from William Shakespeare's Hamlet. The contrast between the elevated style of the original and the everyday student situation creates a humorous effect.

3. Violation of Language Norms. Meme: An image of a surprised cat. Text: "When you typed the wrong spelling and already pressed send." Humor arises from an orthographic mistake and appeals to the recipient's linguistic competence.

4. Polycode Text. Meme: The famous image of a person choosing between two buttons. Text: "Start writing the thesis", "Watch one more video". Meaning emerges through the interaction of image and text, while hyperbole emphasizes the internal conflict familiar to students.

5. Intertextuality. Meme: A movie frame with the caption: "Me after one lecture on stylistics: 'Now I see metaphors everywhere.'" This example contains an intertextual reference to cinematic narratives about acquiring a new vision of reality. Humor is based on exaggeration and reflects the characteristics of academic student discourse.

The analysis of Internet memes circulating in social networks and student communities demonstrates that the most frequent linguostylistic devices include language play, transformation of precedent texts, violation of language norms, intertextuality, and stylistic contrast. These memes exhibit a high degree of expressiveness and aim to create comic effects through the interaction of verbal and visual components. Linguistic compression mechanisms play a particularly important role, enabling complex meanings to be conveyed through minimal textual content.

Thus, the Internet meme represents a complex linguocultural phenomenon combining the properties of text, image, and cultural sign. Linguostylistic analysis demonstrates that the principal characteristics of memes are polycodedness, language play, expressiveness, intertextuality, and precedentness. Owing to these features, memes have become an effective means of communication in the digital environment and an important object of contemporary linguistic research.

The study of Internet memes makes it possible to identify new tendencies in language development, examine the functioning of linguistic means in Internet discourse, and explore mechanisms of meaning construction in digital culture.

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