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INTERNET-MEME AS A POLYMODAL MEDIA-OBJECT: THE BASICS OF LINGUOSEMIOTIC TYPOLOGY

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Abstract

The article deals with the bases of linguistic and semiotic typology of internet-meme. The authors assume that interpretation of modern media space as a form of culture in human consciousness is structurally possible from the perspective of center-periphery relations. The core of the structure comprises the phenomena relevant and conditionally universal for the majority of the members of the linguistic and cultural community. The dual nature of interaction between the center and the periphery mediates the actualization and perception of polymodal media objects. Typologization of Internet memes requires taking into account the most relevant criteria reflecting the content-formal and communicative-pragmatic originality of the media phenomenon under study. The authors suggest that the semiotic status of the Internet-meme is based on the variability of mono- and polymodal actualization of the phenomenon in media communications. Special attention is paid to the description of the pragmatically universal nature of polymodal media objects or individual elements of code/codes makes it possible to use them as an interpretive element within any vector of interpretation of this or that object of real reality, relying on the interpreter's intention and a generalized understanding of the sociocultural competence of the potential recipient. Variability of semiotic codes in the Internet-meme is mediated by different format of their convergence, the degree of potentially realizable intertextuality and the possibility of fixing the meme itself or one / more elements of its code / codes as a precedent phenomenon.

Keywords: Media communication, internet meme, precedent, intertextuality, semiotic code, pragmatic potential.

1. Introduction

The specificity of modern information processes in media communications, related to the generation, transmission, reproduction, consumption and processing of data, in a certain way shapes the semiotics of discursive practices mediated by new media. The dominating position of electronic culture and audiovisual communication contributed to the emergence of a new term – mediatization – within the framework of media linguistic research.

Researchers of sociocultural processes taking place in modern society note the multichannel nature of communication processes (Ross & Rivers, 2017), the expansion of the palette of forms of intertextuality (Benaim, 2018), and, as a consequence, the change in the basic characteristics of modern media texts: the strengthening of hybridity, visualization and fragmentation (Jenkins, 2013). Convergence of technological capabilities and linguistic and creative potential of the language contributes to the formation, establishment and spread of special polymodal objects – media communication products based on several semiotic codes (Dancygier & Lieven, 2017). These polymodal media objects include Internet memes, hashtags, flash mobs, tweets and other virtual media communication products. One of the most vivid phenomena of a polymodal nature, representing the so-called postmodern clip culture, is the Internet. Fragmentation, immanence of ironic subtext and axiological openness make this media object not only a universal way of understanding and reflecting reality (including virtual), but also an instrument of marketing, PR and other practices of speech influence.

2. Problem Statement

One of the key problems in the study of molimodal media objects lies in the interpretation of their essential characteristics. Thus, in the study of Internet-memetics, two perspectives of interpretation can be conventionally outlined: wide and narrow.

The term "mem" was introduced into scientific use by the scientist-etologist Dawkins (2013). In the preface to the book "The Selfish Gene", the researcher notes that it is devoted to animal behavior, but in a perspective that is not commonly considered to be primordial ethological (Dawkins, 2013). The author draws an analogy between cultural and genetic evolution and introduces the concept of "meme" to denote a unit that replicates cultural heritage. The author considers "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" as examples of memes (Dawkins, 2013, p. 83). Later, Lumsden and Wilson (2005) proposed the term "gene-culture" within the framework of the theory of gene-cultural coevolution, the semantic characteristics of which are largely related to the concept put forward by Dawkins. A new round of popularization of the anthropological interpretation of Dawkins' theory opens with the work of Dawkins. Blackmore's (1999) "The Meme Machine", in which the author outlines the problems of meme research in the light of the development of the Internet and computer technology. In a certain sense, this work outlined the vector of development of the theory and interpretation of the term in a narrower practical sense.

For example, most of the research within a narrow approach is based on two basic assumptions: 1) we understand it as a information unit (mainly cultural) and 2) the basic environment for the

emergence and functioning of this unit is the network communities based on online platforms and various mobile applications (Börzsei, 2013; Danung & Attaway, 2008; Milner, 2016).

From the perspective of media linguistics, Internet memes can be interpreted as a media text, i.e. "an integrative multi-level sign that unites different semiotic codes (verbal, non-verbal, media) into a single communicative whole and demonstrates the fundamental openness of the text at the meaning, composition, structure and sign levels" (Cossack, 2014, para. 8). In turn, the media, understood by us as the mediated text and its semiotic organization through the technical means of the transmission channel, seems to be an immanent attribute of the Internet-meme, as it determines not only the instruments of its creation, but also the method and environment of distribution.

In an attempt to concretize the phenomenon of Internet meme in media linguistics, researchers define it as a specific means of communication, a specific Internet genre, a subspecies of media discourse, a visualizing element, a specific type of precedent phenomenon, or a complex phenomenon of Internet communication (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Obviously, even within the narrow approach to the interpretation of the phenomenon under consideration, questions about the specifics of the interaction of codes and the expansion of meaning, as well as its differentiation, or equating to related concepts that are in scientific use (culture, linguoculture, reality, the precedent phenomenon, etc.) are still relevant.

3. Research Questions

The study of the bases of linguistic and semiotic typology of Internet memes requires the adoption of a definition reflecting the creative nature of the phenomenon as a starting point. The definition, according to which meme is an information product with a certain structure, viral spreading potential and actualizing information about events and their evaluation, is formulated taking into account the polymodal potential of the object under consideration:

1) product – a result of creative activity;
2) structured – having a certain structure and form, consisting of elements that are in the unity of interrelations;
3) information – communicating or transmitting information;
4) viral spreading potential – transmitted and popularized in the operating environment by means of transfer from one subject to another (from one user of the Internet network to another);
5) correlating with events or phenomena relevant for the environment / society;
6) realizing pragmatic potential with axiological component.

Within the framework of media linguistic research, this definition allows us to consider not only "text-picture" format, but "text-video", "text-audio", "text-video" in all the diversity of their convergence and representation as an Internet meme.

Note that the functional specificity of memes is not limited to the expression of evaluation. In many cases, it is directly determined by the form of actualization of the media object, which, in turn, is set by the channel of transmission. The very name of the media product – Internet-meme – emphasizes the main means of mediation – the World Wide Web, although the means of creating and distributing this

object may be computer technology and instant messages for mobile and other platforms (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 017).

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to develop a typology of the media object under study based on a structural criterion that takes into account both strictly technological and semiotic aspects that determine its unique polymodal nature. Identification of the ways of semiotic codes convergence in the Internet-meme allows to outline the models of semantic nucleation taking into account semantic polyphony of constituent elements and potential variability of interpretation taking into account cultural and situational context.

5. Research Methods

The research methodology is based on a discursive approach, whose interpretive potential, along with its linguistic potential, includes cognitive and pragmatic aspects of analysis. The inductive method, as well as its specific procedures: direct observation, comparison and analysis, is used at the initial stage of the study to identify the prerequisites for the linguistic and semiotic typology of the object under study. Component analysis and subsequent systematization of the observations allowed to justify and describe the interaction of linguistic and semiotic codes in the Internet-meme according to the selected criterion.

Within the framework of the basic methodological approach, we also rely on a number of communicative and cognitive postulates that "broadcast symbols allow multiple interpretations"; communicative behavior as a whole "multi-dimensional and partisan", i.e. combines several communicative parties and plans; and the interpretation of real communication presupposes an exegetic approach, i.e. a detailed situational and cultural interpretation rather than text decoding (Karasik, 2009). No less relevant for the study of the linguistic and semiotic nature of the Internet-meme is the postulate of "heterogeneity of the content plan of the language expression", which asserts that "the assertive part of the meaning", "the preposition component", and other components of pragmatics "as a rule, have a different degree of explicity in terms of the content of language expression" (Baranov, 2003, p. 56).

6. Findings

Based on our definition, the typology of Internet memes can be based on three basic components that determine its essential characteristics: *structural, functional* and *cultural-situative*. Two of them are discussed in this article.

The structural criterion implies taking into account technological and structural and semiotic aspects. Thus, according to the principle of *creation technology*, the following types of Internet memes can be identified:

1) *Audio memes*, which are a brief audio recording of a recognizable sound and which may be accompanied by a text of a precedent nature, such as an excerpt from a popular song, an audio track to a computer game, film, musical work, slogan, motto or audio element of a more complex meme created earlier.

2) *Text-dominant memes* are represented by media objects in text form without complex technological processing, for example: Preved or uzbagoyasya, actualized as signatures, slogans, inscriptions, slogans, or designed as an imitation of correspondence in the messenger, notes, inscriptions, (fake)-quotes or short literary forms such as "stishki-pirozhki", "poroshki", etc..

3) *Memes with the dominant static visual object* – faces, comics, etc. Typically, these are bright images, which can be independent communicative units, or used as a complement to the visual code in memes, combining several codes.

4) *Memes in GIF* format or "gifki" are dynamic graphic images in bitmap (pixel) format. There is no audio track, so the visual code is the key.

5) *Video memes* contain video sequences and an audio track. Timekeeping is variable, as are all elements of the semiotic code. Meme can be designed as a video (pseudo) of real events or a product of video editing with elements of computer processing and represent a parody, remix, flash mob, etc. The precedent potential in video-memes is higher than in other types, since the counterpoint of semiotic codes, which transmit diverse precedent phenomena, provides an increase in the meaning.

Structurally-semiotic types of memes are closely related to technological varieties, as they are largely dependent on creation technologies and transmission *channels:*

1) *Monocode type* contains only one of the codes (audio, text or visual object).

2) *Binary type* includes two codes (text and video, text and visual image, text and audio, audio and video) and is the most numerous due to the maximum availability and ease of use of its creation and distribution. This type implies further structural diversification. Thus, for example, the subtype "text and visual image" can be formed as one image unit and one text fragment, or several identical or variable images: multiplicative effect, collage or mosaic of two, four or less than six images with different degree of precedence. The collage variant, in turn, can be based on mono- or polythematic images with different levels and types of precedence. For example, the signature "I'll know from a thousand..." and four images of sofas (from the animated series "Simpson", " Spongebob" and Russian television sitcoms).

1) *Polycode type* is represented by more than two codes – video and/or visual image, audio and text.

2) In binary and polycode types we can outline some of the most productive models of semantic interaction of the involved codes. In particular, the basic *principles of semantic structure* may include:

3) *Opposition or conflict* – a contradiction in the interaction of information transmitted by one / different codes. For example, the image of two photos of packages of cigarettes of brands "Senator" and "Kent" with signatures "in instagram – in real life" respectively.

4) *Interpretative key* – the vector of interpretation of the whole communication unit is set by an element of one of the codes. This type of memes includes "text element" *(your face when..., When you have a lot to do and you... When you remember that it's only Monday / one week until the end of summer / tomorrow you should go to work, etc.*) and "visual image" (most often a photo of a person / animal showing an emotion). The visual component can also manifest ironic content, in which the boundaries of seriousness and irony are diffused. In this case, the

signature does not detail the emotional state itself, but the situation in which it could potentially be experienced.

5) *Oxymoron* is an intentional alogism that suggests witty stupidity. For example, a cycle of internet-memes devoted to the interview of a potential candidate for a vacant position, with a text element such as *"When I am asked about my special skills / qualifications / achievements ..."* and a visual image – *the image of a person who sleeps / lets the rings of smoke, etc.*

7. Conclusion

The conducted analysis of the essential characteristics of the Internet meme allows to draw the following conclusions.

From the standpoint of medial linguistics, the Internet meme can be interpreted as a structured polymodal information product that incorporates different semiotic codes, has a high communicative and pragmatic potential, and is spreading virally in the media space.

Typologies of Internet memes can be based on several basic components. The principle of *creation technology* allows to distinguish such types of Internet memes as *audio memes, memes with text dominance, memes with static visual object dominance, memes in GIF or "gifki" format and video memes* with the highest precedent potential due to the convergence of semiotic codes.

Structurally semiotic types of memes are mediated by creation technologies and transmission channels. Among them it is reasonable to consider a *monocode type* (only one of the codes), a *binary type* (two codes) and a *polycode type* (more than two codes).

The polymodal nature of the Internet meme tells it the property to "accumulate" a communicative and pragmatic charge, conditioned by the cultural memory and the community of background knowledge of the representatives of a certain linguistic community, the ability to generate culturally significant associations, to activate information relevant in the social, historical and situational context.

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