LEXICAL FEATURES OF INTERNET MEMES

ЛЕКСИЧНІ ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ІНТЕРНЕТ-МЕМІВ

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Internet communication systems, apart from traditional verbal means, use non-verbal means such as emoticons, GIFs, and memes. Internet memes have become an integral part of online culture, and their lexical features play an important role in their growing popularity. They are combinations of images and text, which spread quickly as a simple text that changes.

The description of the term meme can be found in available studies by different authors as a synthesis of updated meme concept characteristics. Memes are still related to Dawkins' definition, but they have some special properties due to their mode of transmission and speed of replication. With the expansion of computer communications and the rapid growth of Internet forums, chats, blogs, and social networks, the term meme was coined as a new form of Internet communication.

The paper studies such aspects of memes as the evolution of vocabulary, which reflects changes in modern languages. The number of statements regarding the lexical nature of memes as an element of Internet language development makes it possible to consider different interpretations of the meme concept including studying the examples of memes including melodies, ideas, symbols, phrases, images, etc. we suggest that the concept of text can be applied to the description of Internet memes as a lexical element.

The language of internet memes is frequently a coordinated reflection of current dialect patterns and may incorporate slang, language, and indeed recently made words and expressions. It is vital to note that the lexical highlights of internet memes are closely related to a certain period. Interpreting these references is significant in understanding and re-creating memes. Internet memes frequently use special phonetic structures, which may incorporate unusual words and expressions, or alter existing expressions.

The lexis of memes is an interesting phenomenon for studying as a part of the development of language and online culture, which highlights the language capacity of constant alterations and adjustments.

Key words: abbreviations, fixed expressions, internet meme, language-image-texts, lexical, LOLspeak, metaphors, orthography, properties of internet memes.

Системи Інтернет-комунікації, окрім традиційних вербальних засобів, використовують невербальні, такі як смайли, GIF-файли та меми. У статті зазначається, що інтернет-меми стали невід'ємною частиною сучасної онлайн-культури. Їх лексичні особливості відіграють важливу роль у зростанні популярності цих унікальних новоутворень, які можуть бути у вигляді комбінації зображень і тексту. Вони часто стають вірусними й швидко поширюються як імідж і/або простий текст, і які швидко видозмінюються.

Опис терміна мем можна знайти в багатьох дослідженнях різних авторів як синтез оновлених характеристик концепції мему. Поняття мемів походить від визначення Докінза про біологічну структуру, яка є вірусною й швидко розповсюджується, але інтернет-меми мають певні властивості пов'язані зі способом передачі та швидкістю реплікації.

З розширенням комп'ютерної комунікації та швидким зростанням інтернет-форумів, чатів, блогів і соціальних мереж з'явився термін *мем* як нова форма спілкування в Інтернеті. У статті досліджуються лексичні властивості мемів пов'язані із загальним розвитком вокабуляру, який відображає зміни в загальному розвитку сучасних мов і є цікавим явищем для дослідження інтернет-лінгвістикою.

Велика кількість досліджень щодо лексичної природи мемів як елемента розвитку мови Інтернету дозволяє розглянути різні інтерпретації концепції мемів, включаючи вивчення прикладів мемів, таких як мелодії, ідеї, символи, фрази, зображення тощо. У роботі ми розглядаємо можливість застосування поняття тексту до опису інтернет-мемів як лексичного елемента.

Мова інтернет-мемів часто є узгодженим відображенням поточних діалектних моделей і може включати сленг, діалектні віріації, а також нещодавно створені слова та вирази. Слід зазначити, що лексичні особливості інтернет-мемів тісно пов'язані з певним історичним періодом. Вивчення цих історичних умов розвитку мемів є важливою для їх розуміння та відтворення. Інтернет-меми часто використовують спеціальні фонетичні структури, які можуть містити незвичні слова та вирази або змінювати існуючі вирази.

Лексика мемів є цікавим феноменом для вивчення як складова розвитку лінгвістичної та онлайн-культури, який підкреслює здатність мови до постійних змін і коригувань.

Ключові слова: абревіатури, фіксовані вирази, інтернет-мем, мова-зображення-текст, лексика, LOLspeak, метафори, орфографія.

Introduction. The rapid development of Internet communication has revolutionized the pace of language evolution. Changes that would have taken decades or even centuries in the past now occur in a matter of weeks or months. This dynamic virtual landscape has opened up endless possibilities for playing with language. One particularly prominent manifestation of this is the collaborative creation of Internet memes. According to M. Knobel and C. Lankshear, an Internet meme is the swift dissemination of concepts through the use of text and images [13].

The users of forums, web pages, blogs, social networks, etc. developed their own communicational system, which enables them to share their ideas, thoughts, and jokes much more creatively than in the conventional ways of communication. The internet-communicational system except traditional language uses non-verbal ones such as emoticons, GIFs, memes, etc. Memes are a part of the online culture presented as image and text combinations or plain texts, which are rapidly spreading and changing in the way.

Internet memes have become an integral part of online culture and their lexical features play a key role in their growing popularity. Their catchy images and ironic jokes often become important cultural phenomena. One interesting aspect of memes to study is their lexical evolution, which reflects modern language changes.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The meme concept was created in 1976 by R. Dawkins in the book *The Selfish Gene,* where he defined it as "the unit of cultural transmission" [8]. Nowadays, we can find the concept of memes practically everywhere on the internet relating to different kinds of images, jokes or popular trends.

The term *meme* has changed and can be found in the present research by different authors as a synthesis of characteristics of the updated concept of meme. Due to the expansion of computer communication and the exponential growth of Internet forums, chats, blogs and social networks, the concept of meme was coined as a new form of Internet communication. The meme is still related to Dawkins's definition but features some special characteristics due to their way of transmission and speed of replication.

D. Sperber describes memes as two main kinds of *cultural replicators* associated with the human mind – the internal mental representations, such as beliefs; and the external public representations, such as paintings. He also defines a third representation type of cultural representation, as a combination of the public and mental representations within a social group [21, pp. 24–33].

Psychologist S. Blackmore stresses that the main role of imitation is meme replication and adds the notion of an interactor as the entity that interacts with the environment, carries the replicator inside and protects it [3, p. 5]. D. Dennet, defines a meme as the name of any item of cultural evolution and

adds three variations. [10]. M. Olesen developed the idea of a meme on theories of communication and defined a meme as any form of cultural phenomenon that can be copied from one mind to another [16, p. 71].

B. Buchel described an internet meme as an idea, a thought, or a concept which can be passed between minds. It can be anything from a catchy tune you adopt unwittingly, which you keep humming subconsciously through a slogan from a commercial to intricate and abstract ideas of grand design or the Big Bang [4, p. 18]. A. Kulkarni regards an Internet meme as a medium of promotion which can reach a wider audience in a short span of time [14, p. 13].

The number of descriptions of the meme's lexical nature as an element of internet language development allows a variety of interpretations of the meme concept, which have to be studied.

The aim of the study. In the article, we study the lexical features of internet memes as a unique phenomenon that actively influences the development of modern language and online culture.

Presentation of the main research material. Memes were described by R. Dawkins as elements transferred consciously or unconsciously from person to person [8]. An example of a meme might be a melody, an idea, a symbol, a phrase, a picture, etc. In his book, Dawkins defines three properties of memes: longevity (the amount of time the replicator can live and/or reproduce itself), fecundity (the rate of copies being completed), and copy-fidelity (the precision of copies).

Internet memes originated on the Internet as a quick way of spreading cultural symbols and ideas and have their roots in Internet culture, beginning with the first online forums and communities. A lot of memes have their origins in culture, politics, or social phenomena, and they are closely related to modern events. Starting as simple pictures with text, memes have evolved into complex concepts that include images, phrases, and even videos. This process goes with lexical changes, which begin to denote certain ideas and concepts.

A meme arises as a unity of information replicated through different types of communication and requires a channel and an agent for transmission. Its time of existence is variable and its reach depends on the time structure and the channel of transmission. Its success depends on the social context, it can stay or be ignored, and it can be adapted by other social contexts [5]. Content-wise, they usually consist of offbeat news, websites, catchy phrases, images, or video clips. Internet memes are inside jokes or pieces of knowledge, which many people understand [1].

The key features of memes are variation, selection and retention according to Blackmore. Memes practically never replicated in the same way twice. Some memes draw attention, are remembered and propagate in the media, while others fail to get copied at all. Some features of the original meme are retained or imitated by copying or learning [3]. Internet memes have become one of the most important ways to express emotions on social media. Compared with text-only communication, communication becomes more expressive and vivid when Internet memes are incorporated [6].

In descriptions of internet memes as lexical items a conception of text can be applied. This may include any form of language (written or spoken), pictures, gestures, face work and other semiotic signs [22, p. 116]. The most important criterion to define a text in media semiotics as well as in linguistics is coherence, which is semantic relations among single units of a text [9]. Humour or irony might play with the incongruity of what is anticipated and what occurs and might be a challenge for the recipient to reconstruct the underlying coherence. It is not only a text-inherent property, but also a cognitive operation of selecting and categorizing information [11, p. 448]. In meme comprehension, the recipients are used to humorous meme adaptations that violate their conventional expectations.

Internet memes represent language-image-texts that can include cultural or political images and usually the basis is the image is mostly recontextualized by language [17]. Memes are an ideal combination of image-based and linguistic communication, where visual communication has become even more important. It has to be emphasized that this kind of meme type can be understood as a multimodal artefact. It is only through collective use that the artefact becomes an Internet meme [17, p. 33].

Memes are usually simple and can be of low quality. They can be single or multimodal and often contain short texts or other images, which can be anything from movies, TV shows and debates, photos of celebrities, animals, etc. In their textual part, they can contain fixed phrases created in a specific style, or non-fixed text. The texts are usually short; they can sometimes be one single word, a caption, or a dialogue.

The textual part of the memes has unique linguistic features that make it compelling for modern linguists who study the language in memes, the (in)voluntary mistakes that are made, the sentence structure (in)correctness, the orthography, the abbreviations, the linguistic patterns, etc. The language of internet memes is often a direct reflection of current language trends and may include slang, jargon, and even newly created words and phrases. It is important to note that the lexical features of internet memes are closely related to a certain period. The original meme will be subject to numerous changes, which will lead to a huge number of variations spreading very quickly. The short lifespan of internet memes makes them a valuable source of information about social processes that usually take decades or centuries. They contain some references from popular culture, politics and religion, references specific to a certain region and from professional fields, which require an impressive amount of knowledge to be understood. Decoding these references is crucial in understanding and re-creating memes.

Heylighen has identified criteria, which might increase the chances of memes spreading. They can be divided into three different classes: objective criteria, which refer to the object of the meme, subjective criteria referring to the host who assimilates and remembers the meme, and intersubjective criteria referring to the process of transmission of the meme between its hosts [12].

Internet memes have a significant impact on language practices contributing to the development of new vocabulary, spreading of slang expressions and the creation of unique language entities. Internet memes often use unique linguistic constructions, which may include new words and expressions, or modify existing expressions. They can also play with grammar and punctuation to create their language style. These features spread quickly and influence generally accepted language norms. In addition, memes are often used to convey certain sociocultural connotations, which make them an important tool for intercultural communication.

One of the most interesting and challenging areas of study for memes is language changes. Diachronic linguistics studies changes that occur over centuries. The information obtained in this way is usually scattered and difficult to structure. Internet memes provide a unique opportunity to see language changes occur over shorter periods. K. Shubeck and S. Huette found that "linguistic features appear to be enough to predict meme transmission success without any information about social network structure" [20]. D. Freytag found that the assumption of spreading and popularization of a meme is a process of social interaction and corresponds to a diachronic system of lexical meme derivation [6].

In a communicatively oriented typology of meme analysis by L. Shifman, there are three constituents: form, content and position, where the form of a meme is a state perceived through the senses, the content is an idea expressed, and the position is the author's point of view to the readers [19]. The language of internet memes performs several functions, including communicative, social and cultural and is a means of conveying information, establishing social connections and developing an identity in an online environment.

This creativity is also reflected in memes as the authors often create their own words, use metaphors, slogans and fixed expressions, make intentional swaps between lexical items, employ associative techniques etc. The linguistic creativity becomes apparent when the meme authors use their own rules for word order and spelling. These rules often do not correspond to the rules of the Standard English. This is so-called LOLspeak or deliberate misspelling, writing words with different letters than the original spelling. Interestingly though, that even if the words are spelt differently, they sound the same as the original ones when read aloud. LOLspeak also includes misspelt verb forms and strange word reduplication.

Texts in memes rarely follow standard language rules. Another important linguistic feature is abbreviations, which are used in memes to convey meaning in as few words and/or symbols as possible. One of the best-known linguistic features of memes is the (un)intentional language mistakes in the texts. A deliberate misspelling might be made to give some new and often catchy effect to add humour.

As a rule, all Internet memes can be characterized by specific linguistic features, such as word transformations, the use of non-standard spelling, grammar and punctuation, as well as puns on words and expressions. These features make memes recognizable and relevant. Compared with emojis which are restricted to a fixed size, Internet memes are more expressive and of a great variety. Some research try to bridge the gap between vision and language by studying internet memes represented not only by texts but also by images [23].

The lexical development of Internet memes is connected with changes in the meaning of words and phrases. For example, the word *troll* originally meant a person whose purpose was to irritate other members of the Internet community. However, in the context of memes, this word has taken on a new meaning, indicating an ironic or provocative participant in a discussion. The analysis of the Internet memes can specify which of the meme elements are subject to modification. The linguistic part of this Internet meme traditionally includes analyzing the text structure, use of expressive means (ideophones or which meaning is related to the sound, mimetics, sensory means, etc.), and deliberate or unintentional absence of punctuation.

Accept changing the meaning of already existing words and expressions, Internet memes also contribute to the creation of new lexical units. These may be expressions incomprehensible to an outside observer, but become popular due to their uniqueness and ability to cause laughter among the community.

The application of the example of specific Internet memes is a confirmation of M. Paradowski's theory about the life cycle of a meme. Having appeared, the meme spreads primarily through social networks. Sometime later, a meme might become so popular in the media space that large online news portals and network companies can start using it [18].

The lexical features of Internet memes have a significant impact on linguistic culture. They demonstrate the ability of language to adapt to new contexts and express new ideas. Due to memes, certain expressions become widespread, highlighting the influence of online culture on language development. Internet memes provide an excellent basis for studying Internet communication. Moreover, memes can be singled out into a special genre and permit to study of the evolution of language.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. The language used in Internet memes is a unique phenomenon that actively influences the development of modern languages and online culture. Understanding the linguistic features of Internet memes permits one to understand current trends in communication and culture. Their distinctive traits are unique to their own type, which fosters the creation of novel modes of Internet meme sharing and replication. The lexical evolution of Internet memes is a fascinating phenomenon that reflects the dynamics of language and culture. Not only does it contribute to online culture, but it also demonstrates the ability of language to constantly change, adapt and give valuable material for further studying of the lexical features of Internet memes in their development.

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