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ONYMIC PUN IN MEMETIC DISCOURSE AS A CONTINUATION OF LITERARY TRADITION

ОНИМНИЙ КАЛАМБУР У МЕМЕТИЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ ЯК ПРОДОВЖЕННЯ ЛІТЕРАТУРНОЇ ТРАДИЦІЇ

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The article focuses on investigating onymic puns in the memetic discourse – stylistic devices based on onymic play that form an integral part of memes. The pun is viewed as a specific linguistic construction that allows two lexical meanings to be activated simultaneously within one context. The clash of two different meanings in the pun leads to a misunderstanding, resulting in the addressee's defeated expectations, the wider the gap between these meanings – the brighter the image is created, the stronger the humorous effect is achieved.

The pun can be interpreted not only as a stylistic phenomenon but also as a pattern interrupt. The pun functions as a cognitive dissonance mechanism: the recipient anticipates a specific semantic continuation, a pattern, but the sudden appearance of an alternative meaning subverts this expectation. This unexpected shift interrupts the habitual pattern of perception, triggering surprise and often laughter.

The linguistic triggers involved in the pun may include portmanteau occasionalisms, polysemous words, homophones, homographs, paronyms, and visual elements alone, which create a visual pun. Whether caused by polysemy, homophony, or graphical similarity, puns ignite our fantasy, distorting our cognition, confusing it, creating the unexpected.

Memetic discourse is polymodal, relying on the interplay between verbal and visual components. Their interaction generates a specific – and often unexpected – punning effect, depending on the role of the visual component. Visual involvement in pun creation may take three degrees of visualisation: 1) moderate, when an image merely illustrates the idea without contributing to the wordplay; 2) equipollent, when the image participates equally in the pun; and 3) dominant, when purely visual puns – not wordplay but image play – arise through semantic clashes between overlapping visuals.

According to their onymic features, puns can be categorized as anthroponymic, ideonymic, toponymic, chrematonymic, or ethnonymic.

Key words: cultural studies, literary discourse, meme, memetic discourse, stylistic device, pun, onymic pun.

Стаття зосереджена на дослідженні онімного каламбуру в меметичному дискурсі, тобто стилістичних прийомів, заснованих на онімній грі, що є невід'ємною частиною мемів. Каламбур розглядається як специфічна мовна конструкція, яка дозволяє одночасно актуалізувати два лексичних значення в одному контексті. Зіткнення двох різних значень у каламбурі призводить до непорозуміння, що викликає порушення очікувань адресата; чим більший розрив між цими значеннями – тим яскравішим є створений образ і сильнішим гумористичний ефект.

Каламбур може тлумачитися не лише як стилістичне явище, але і як порушення шаблону. Він функціонує як механізм когнітивного дисонансу: реципієнт очікує певного семантичного продовження, шаблону, але раптове виникнення альтернативного значення підриває ці очікування. Такий несподіваний зсув перериває звичний спосіб сприйняття, викликаючи здивування, часто сміх.

Під час створення каламбуру мовними тригерами можуть слугувати оказіональні слова-«портмоне», багатозначні слова, омофони, омографи, пароніми та навіть візуальні елементи, які створюють візуальний каламбур. Незалежно від того, чи викликаний каламбур: багатозначністю, омофонією чи графічною подібністю, він розпалює нашу увагу, певним чином спотворюючи й плутаючи наше сприйняття, створюючи ефект порушених очікувань.

Меметичний дискурс є полімодальним, оскільки ґрунтується на поєднанні вербального та візуального компонентів. Їхня взаємодія породжує специфічний, часто несподіваний ефект у створенні каламбурів, що значною мірою залежить від ролі візуального компонента. Участь візуального компонента у створенні каламбуру може мати три ступені візуалізації: 1) помірний: коли зображення є лише ілюстрацією без реального внеску у гру слів; 2) рівнозначний: коли зображення є рівноправним учасником гри слів; 3) доміантний: «безслівні» або суто візуальні каламбури, не гра слів, а гра зображень, де картинки вступають у взаємодію, семантично перебиваючись.

Відповідно до своїх онімних характеристик, каламбури можна поділити на антропонімні, ідеонімні, топонімні, хремотонімні та етнонімні типи.

Ключові слова: культурологічні студії, літературний дискурс, мем, меметичний дискурс, стилістичний прийом, каламбур, онімний каламбур.

Thesis statement. The current investigation focuses on the investigation of onymic puns in the memetic discourse, i.e., stylistic devices based on the onymic play which are an integral part of memes. The analysis looks into the broad dimensions of memetic discourse based on the culture of stylistic devices. The paper addresses how traditional onymic pun functions in the form of the new phenomenon, meme. Furthermore, we observe the evolution of literary discourse into memetic discourse in the paradigm of participatory culture.

To explain the characteristics of onymic play as a major actor in punning, we should elucidate appellative and onym contrivance and dwell on the impact of literary and memetic discourses.

Purpose of the study. Firstly, in order to get more insight into the mechanisms of punning, we dwell on the characteristics of memetic discourse and literary discourse. In this paper we follow the definition of **literary discourse** as a type of communicative activity which is deautomatised due to its significance and emotionality when every recipient finds their own sense [1, p. 140]. Thus, literary discourse is treated as «an act of communication between the creator of the text and the reader, ... a communicative unit» [2, p. 214]. Related to **memetic discourse**, it can be understood as a communicative-pragmatic pattern of linguistic behaviour reflected in memes with intertextuality as its foundation. Memes as «inherently unstable cultural forms» [3, p. 498] are treated throughout our paper as user-generated, remixed and recontextualised viral short texts, videos or images.

Secondly, we aim at the unpacking mechanisms of punning. Being a type of cultural capital, memes possess a means of capturing attention through humour. Thus, the pun can be regarded as one of such instruments. The term **pun** is defined as «a type of joke in which one sound sequence (e.g., a word) has two meanings, and this similarity in sound creates a relationship for the two meanings from which humor is derived» [4, p. 612]. The pun is viewed as a specific linguistic construction that allows two lexical meanings to be actualised simultaneously within one context. It implies a certain vagueness of expression: according to G. Leech, a pun is an ambiguity: specifically, a foregrounded lexical ambiguity [5, p. 209]. The introduction of pun challenges traditional lexical semantics «by violating the one-sense-per-context assumption» [6], since the pun is, in fact, «a semantic achievement and derives from the symbolic nature of language» [7, p. 14]. As J. Brown puts it, «the pun is revealed as a symbolic device which can force us from the pragmatic realm of direct experience into the complex realm of abstractions, the magnificent realm of fantasy» [7, p. 15].

Analysis of the recent research. The necessary condition for perceiving the pun is the context «in which multiple and disparate meanings for the pun word are acceptable» [7, p. 15]. J. Brown equates the meaning of the pun word and the context, in which it was employed: «The meaning of a word is, fundamentally, its context, and the significance of context-linking lies in its influence upon total context; the pun asserts a complex, non-lexical meaning which functions to define total meaning»

[7, p. 17], stating, that «Most puns link only two contexts, make use of only two meanings for the pun word» [7, p. 18], though triple context puns exist as well. Still, the main distinctive feature of the pun, its fundamental quality, is the realisation of two meanings simultaneously, when «both meanings of the word feel equally apropos. Ideally, these two meanings are vastly different from one another» [8]. The wider the gap between these meanings – the brighter image is created, the stronger the humorous effect is achieved, since the text is «a web of shifting meanings, and every new interpretation of one item recreates afresh the context for all the other items» [9, p. 149]. G. Ulmer such a complete blend of different meanings in the pun terms as the **puncept**, the author's neologism, a pun in its essence being understood as a portmanteau word, uniting the words **pun** and **concept**: «puncepts work as well for organizing thought as concepts (sets formed on the basis of similar signifiers rather than similar signifieds)» [10, p. 164]. This new notion reflects the idea that play on words may perform the function of conceptual thinking. G. Ulmer describes a puncept as a tool for organizing thought that is based on the similarity of the sounds of words rather than their meanings. He believes that puncepts can be as effective for organizing thought as traditional concepts, the puncept being a decentering term that disrupts traditional linguistic structures [Ulmer 10]. Notably, the linguists who explore the pun tend to reprocess it in their scientific research (e.g., *Pun-derstanding* in Jaech A. et al. [11]).

The clash of two different meanings in the pun leads to a certain misunderstanding, which results in arising the addressee's defeated expectations. The pun can be interpreted not only as a stylistic phenomenon, but also as a pattern interrupt – a concept borrowed from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). In this framework, the pun functions as a cognitive dissonance mechanism: the recipient anticipates a specific semantic continuation, a pattern, but this expectation is subverted by the sudden appearance of an alternative meaning. This unexpected shift interrupts the habitual pattern of perception, triggering surprise, often causing laughter. The pun breaks the mental template, resulting in a break in the pattern – a mechanism that momentarily disorients and then re-orientes the mind to a different direction.

The analysis of the interplay of meanings that create pun allowed J. Brown to distinguish two major classes of puns with four subdivisions in each: «puns fall into two large classes or groups, defined by the relation which holds between the syntactical assertion of the sentence (which I will call its syntax) in which the pun occurs and the total meaning of that sentence (which I will call its sense)» [7, p. 18–19], with the first group of pun types occurring «in sentences in which the syntax is identical to (literal to) the sense. ... there are four possible sets of relations which the variable pun meaning may exhibit in this situation: it may be literal to both syntax and sense, metaphoric to both, literal to the syntax and metaphoric to the sense, or metaphoric to syntax and literal to sense» [7, p. 19], and the second group of pun types being «more complex, ... this arises from the fact that an additional metaphoric factor is present – for these puns occur in sentences whose syntax is metaphoric to their sense, sentences whose total meaning differ from their syntactic assertions» [7, p. 21].

Building the pun involves the interplay of primarily two lexical meanings, the pattern being universal for any language. As S. Attardo puts it, «the phonological and phonetic constraints on puns are the same across languages, but that the syntactico-lexical constraints, the semantic constraints, and the mechanisms that allow the resolution of the incongruity, i.e., the Cratylistic theory of soundsense matching are universal» [12, p. 93]. This type of word play attracts and amalgamates the words that sound and / or look alike, when «a word suggests two or more meanings by exploiting polysemy, homonymy, or phonological similarity to another word, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect» [6].

The creation of the pun entertains the use of polysemantic (polysemous) words, i.e. words that possess more than one meaning, and homonyms. According to K. Wales, the pun «involves the use of a polysemous word to suggest two or more meanings (commonly literal v. figurative); or the use of homonyms, i.e. different words which look or sound the same but which have different meanings» [13, p. 349].

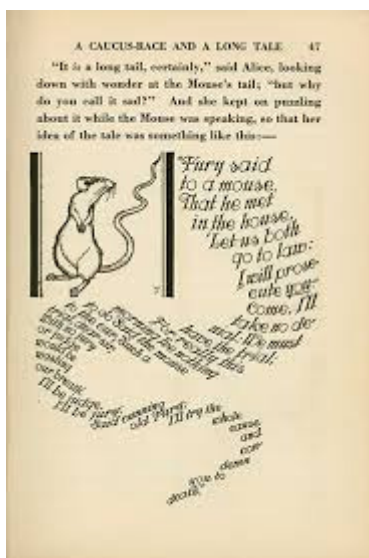
Discussion. On the basis of their material representation puns can be classified as **homographic** or **heterographic**, based on whether they rely on words with identical spellings or similar sounds [14]. Thus, in the process of pun creation «the guilty party» may be polysemantic (or polysemous) words, homophones

or homographs, and even paronyms (partially identical words). Whether caused by polysemy, homophony, or graphical similarity, puns ignite our fantasy, in its own way distorting our cognition, confusing it, creating the unexpected. We should bear in mind that a specific subtype of pun, namely **antanaclasis**, is formed by the repetition of complete homonyms: «the same word or form or sounds but in different senses in the near co-text: e.g. Round, but not round for long (Terry's chocolate orange); or Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave (Richard II, II. i)» [13, p. 349]. It differs from **sylllepsis**, which is formed without the repeated target of the pun. Some scholars classify sylllepsis as a specific type of pun, particularly when the play on words results in a humorous or rhetorical effect. As S. Attardo notes, «Certain types of puns, such as sylllepsis and antanaclasis, involve a deliberate play on words that exploits multiple meanings for rhetorical or humorous effect» [15, p. 114]. He also terms antanaclasis and sylllepsis as horizontal or vertical puns: «Horizontal puns are syntagmatic (both linguistic expressions are present in the text), vertical are paradigmatic (only one linguistic expression is in the text)» [15, p. 118].

It is necessary to note that when analysing the linguistic mechanism of the pun, we tend to concentrate our attention mainly on words and their meanings, but puncepts may appear from a combination of morphemes that form an occasional word. As S. Attardo argues, «Puns are not exclusively word-based. Puns involve the presence of (minimally) two senses, but need not involve two 'words', as does example (1) "pie + rates". The two senses can come about via the interpretation of any string, be it related or not to a word» [12, p. 91].

In literary discourse we deal only with the verbal component of the message, as in the illustrations from classics, such as the title of the play by O. Wilde *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where two homophones are at play – the name of the character *Ernest* and the adjective *earnest*, or in L. Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, when the dialogue between Mouse and Alice takes place: «*Mine is a long and a sad tale!*» – «*It is a long tail, certainly!*» (pic.1). Here, the homophones which create the pun are tale (a story) and tail (a part of an animal's body). Notably, this part of the text is laid out as a mouse tail [16]:

In contrast, memetic discourse is polymodal, as it is based on the combination of a verbal with a



Pic. 1. *The Mouse's Tale from Alice in Wonderland by L. Carroll*

visual component. Their collaboration produces a specific, often unexpected effect in creating puns, which mainly depends on the role played by the visual component. Visual puns, as C. Moore states, «can come in two forms: those that derive from verbal puns and those that are purely visual», and «In art, the purest visual puns, however, do not rely on language at all, but imagery alone» [17]. According to E. Kincaid, who analysed visual puns in design, three classes of them can be distinguished: **literal**, which uphold the primary meaning of the message; **suggestive**, which requires additional efforts to understand the pun; and **comparative**, which rely on two or more key symbols [18]. Imagery in memes might become of paramount importance, since «the visual representation of an image can create an ambiguity which is considered to be a central figure of creating a pun» [19, p. 364].

C. Hempelmann et al. claim, that «for a visual pun to be not just play with pictures, ... there also needs to be a further semantic relation, an overlap between the two meanings, other than the visual resemblance» [20, p. 95], so it may be «fruitful to distinguish different categories of puns according to degree of visual resemblance, context dependency, and semantic overlap» [20, p. 106].

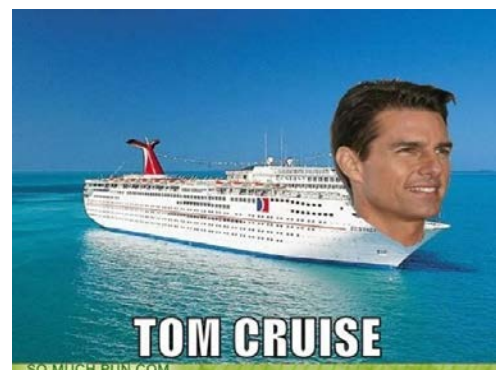
The participation of the visual component in the creation of the pun might have three **degrees of visualisation**: 1) **moderate**: a picture just being an illustration without any real contribution to the play on words; 2) **equipollent**: a picture being an equal counterpart in the word play; 3) **domineering**: «wordless» or purely visual puns, not play on words, but play on pictures, where the images come to clash, semantically overlapping.



Pic. 2. The pun based on the homophones *no way* and *Norway*



Pic. 3. The pun with an important visual part



Pic. 4. The pun with the juxtaposition of the surname with the vehicle

The example below illustrates an arbitrary selection of a semantically irrelevant picture that can be easily replaced with another (pic. 2). The dialogue consists of two lines: *Can you name a country without an “r” in it?* – *No way*. The pun itself is based on the homophones *no way* and *Norway*, that are not semantically entangled in this meme with the picture of a classroom.

At the same time, the importance of a visual part of any meme cannot be underestimated. This type of discourse is polymodal in its essence, which leads to a natural synesthesia of verbal and visual constituents. In the following example (pic. 3), the text is connected to the photograph of two actors, enhancing the realisation of the pun: *Tom Cruise is being held against his Will*. The illustration is necessary to understand this pun: *to be held against one’s will* (to be a captive) is mingled with the name of a famous actor, *Will Smith*.

In another meme (pic. 4), the visual component is constructed of the head of *Tom Cruise* and a *cruise ship*, foregrounding the juxtaposition of the surname with this particular type of transportation:

An occasional word, a puncept, is introduced in the following illustration of the pun: *Feminem* (pic. 5). It blends the stage name of a popular rap singer *Eminem*, and the adjective *feminine*, accompanied by a modified portrait of the singer:



Pic. 5. The puncept

The polymodality of memetic coding might oust the necessity of the textual component completely. It happens relatively rarely, but examples of such memes are circulating on the Internet, as in the following illustration (pic. 6) of a «textless» clash of two images that convey two different objects, hence, meanings: a bust of **Julius Caesar** serving as a **knife stand**. This combination immediately reminds us of the assassination of Caesar by his friend Marcus Junius Brutus in alliance with other attackers. In this case, it is possible to speak about a **visual pun**, based solely on the visual components of the meme.

One more widely spread example of a visual pun (among many others) is a reminder of the pandemic times, with their social distancing and isolation, which led to educational and other gatherings being performed online to avoid infection. Many people worked and studied using the Zoom platform, the situation being combined with a famous fresco by Leonardo Da Vinci *The Last Supper*, in which only Jesus Christ remains at the table, with other apostles being present only virtually via Zoom (pic. 7):



Pic. 6. The visual pun, Caesar as a knife stand

Visual puns, as well as verbal ones, produce the same humorous effect when «semantic overlap (SOv) in addition to visual resemblance might enhance funniness ratings» [21, p. 194].

Various classes of proper names may become a part of the onymic play, though with different intensity: anthroponyms are used more frequently than chrematonyms, cosmonyms are not used at all. Here we shall dive into a detailed analysis of their engagement in this play on words.

Anthroponyms constitute an essential layer of proper names, engaged in creating the onymic pun. Occasional portmanteau words are created from the elements of personal names, as in the example with the blending of the name of a famous singer *Bob Marley* and a Polish common noun *bobr* (beaver) (pic. 8):

The same linguistic mechanism functions in the next example (pic. 9), where the name of a military commander, Napoleon, is played on: his mounted picture is titled as *Napole-on*, with an occasional hyphen, while his standing on foot, not on horseback, is titled *Napole-off*. This onymic play switches on the second additional meaning – *on / off the horse*.

Homophones are widely employed in onymic puns, combining proper names with the meaning of common words. In the illustration below (pic. 10), two pictures are signed *Manual* and *Manuel*, a part of a car mechanism and a personal name, the latter being supported by an imitation of a sombrero, which highlights a specific ethnic colouring of the meme:

The same clash of two meanings is observed in the surname of a well-known artist, Salvador Dali, in Ukrainian being a homophone of an adverb (pic. 11): *ДАЛИ* (Dali) – *further*, consequently, the second picture foregrounds this semantic overlap: *БЛИЖЧЕ* – *nearer*.



Pic. 7. *The Last Supper* via Zoom



Pic. 8. The onymic pun with the anthroponym



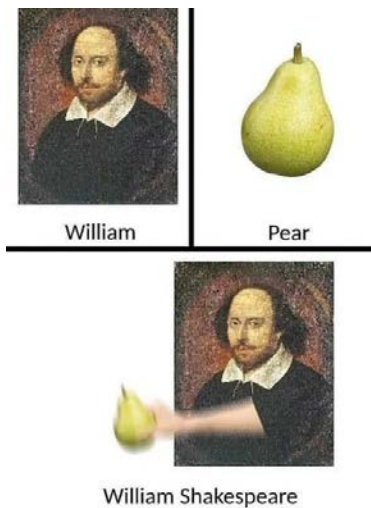
Pic. 9. The onymic play with the anthroponym



Pic. 10. The example of homophones in the onymic pun



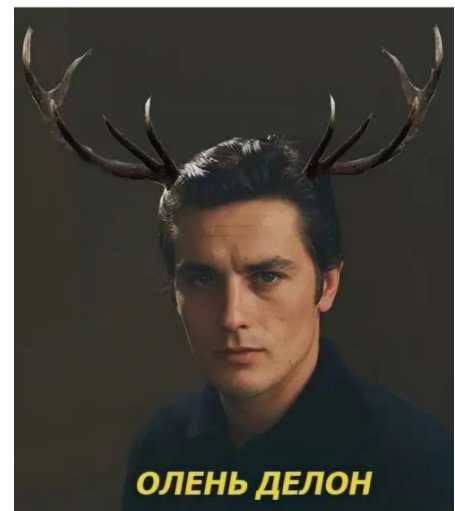
Pic. 11. Ukrainian homophones in the onymic pun



Pic. 12. The example of homographs in the onymic pun



Pic. 13. English paronyms in the onymic pun



Pic. 14. Cross-language paronyms in the onymic pun

Phantom of the Opurra



Pic. 15. The onymic pun with the ideonym



Pic. 16. Literal meaning of the onymic play



Pic. 17. Onymic play with the occasional word

Homographs are less prevalent in onymic puns of memetic discourse, but no less potent in their humorous effect. In the meme below (pic. 12), two homographs appear: *pear* and *Shakes + peare*:

Paronyms serve as a powerful tool for creating puns, since the exactly identical sounding or spelling is not obligatory for understanding the message. A bright example of such use of a surname of the most popular writer of our millennium, Joanne Rowling, is used in the meme-quotation of the *Ridin'* song lyrics by Chamillionaire (pic. 13): «*They see me rollin', they hatin'*», where the verb is substituted by *Rowling*. These two words resemble each other in look and sound, but obviously they are not identical:

One more instance of such paronymic attraction is observed in the meme with the name of an outstanding actor *Alain Delon* substituted by a Ukrainian common noun *олень* (deer) (pic. 14):

Ideonyms occupy the second place in popularity in memes pun-wise. Their understanding requires a common thesaurus for the meme creator and her audience, hence, only very well-known ideonyms may be employed, such as *The Phantom of the Opera* musical interwoven with a feline sound of contentment *purr* (pic. 15):

In the next instance (pic. 16), the title of J. R. R. Tolkien's famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* is interrelated with a picture of a cat on a jeweler's counter, thus acquiring the second, literal, meaning:

The title of a widely known picture of S. Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*, together with its contents, becomes a prominent example of the pun, based on the paronyms *memory* and *meme-ry* [22], the latter being an occasional word (pic. 17):

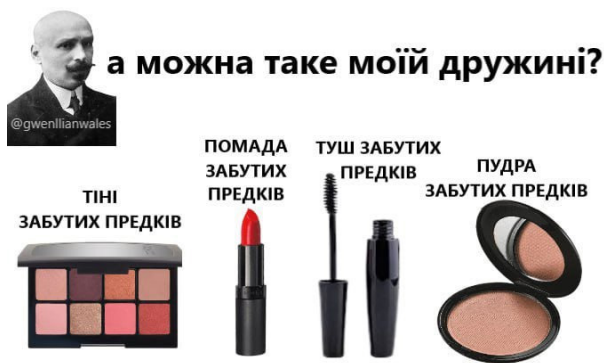
The Persistence of Meme-ry

Another illustration of the pun based on the ideonym is the following meme (pic. 18), where the title of a classic Ukrainian novel *Тіні забутих предків* / *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky overlaps semantically with a common noun *міні* / *shadows* – eye make up, the idea supported by three other segments of the text – *lipstick of forgotten ancestors, mascara of forgotten ancestors, powder of forgotten ancestors*:

Toponyms take the third place as to their frequency in the onymic pun. Geographical names, mainly of countries, may be humorously reassessed, gaining new shades of meaning, as in *Pennsylvania* (pic. 19), which derives its name from Latin *silva* «wood» and Admiral *Penn*, that turns into *Pencilvania*, a city of pencils:

The universe of Tolkien’s Middle-earth gave birth to a bright illustration of a toponymic pun in Ukrainian (pic. 20): *Нижній Новгород* / *Lower Novgorod*, a real toponym, turns into *Верхній Новгород* / *Upper Novgorod*, an imaginary one, presumably a more exquisite city:

One more instance (pic. 21) presents a collection of toponymic puns, all of which play with the name of an island country, Madagascar, ascribing it different emotions: *Madagascar*, *Gladagascar*, *Sadagascar*, *Madatgascar*:



Pic. 18. Onymic play in Ukrainian ideonymy

Pencilvania



Pic. 19. Onymic pun with the toponym



Pic. 20. Onymic play with toponyms in Ukrainian



Pic. 21. Collection of toponymic puns

Chrematonyms become a part of the onymic pun rarely, and only a few examples were found. As a rule, product names interact in this subtype of the pun. In the meme below (pic. 22), two chrematonyms – a car brand and a mobile telephone brand – appear in two consecutive pictures with the sinking car: *KIA*, *NOKIA*, the latter being a homophone of the phrase *no Kia*:

Two more memes with the chrematonymic puns deal with the names of beverages. *Corona beer* turns into *Ebola Extra*, bringing into play the context of the Covid-19 virus (pic. 23), and *Айран / Ayran* is added the component *Мейден / Maiden*, turning it into *Iron Maiden*, a heavy metal band (pic. 24):

Ethonyms as the foundation of the pun were singled out only once in a series of pictures presenting a dialogue: *How does Moses brew his tea?* – **Hebrews it.** *Hebrews (he brews)* is a homonym of *Hebrew* (a Semitic language) (pic. 25):

Conclusions. We have established a significant resemblance of the pun creation in both literary and memetic discourses. The pun is viewed as a specific linguistic construction that allows two lexical meanings to be actualised simultaneously within one context. During the creation of a pun, the linguistic triggers may include portmanteau occasionalisms, polysemous words, homophones, homographs, paronyms, and even visual elements alone, which create a visual pun. The clash of two different meanings leads to a pattern interrupt, which results in the addressee’s defeated expectations and, consequently, produces a humorous effect.

The degrees of visualisation in the pun might be of three types: 1) moderate: a picture illustrating the verbal pun; 2) equipollent: a picture being an equal counterpart in the word play, a verbal-visual pun; 3) domineering: purely visual puns, with the images semantically overlapping.

According to their onymic features, puns can be subdivided into anthroponymic, ideonymic, toponymic, chrematonymic and ethnonymic types in the state-of-the-art English segment of the Internet.



Pic. 22. Onymic play with chrematonyms



Pic. 23. Onymic play with *Corona* beer



Pic. 24. Onymic play with a beverage



Pic. 25. Onymic play with ethnonyms

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