

## PhR 2019 Philological Readings

### CULTURAL IDENTITY SHIFT IN THE INTERNET MEME LOANS

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#### *Abstract*

Memes as cultural units are compared by R. Dawkins to the biological concept of gene: fidelity, fecundity and longevity being their main characteristics. Internet memes share some of those properties ascribed to memes in general: they are considered capable of self-replicating and spreading from person to person. Much like cultural items get propagated across populations, internet memes are communicated from person to person, spreading across virtual networking groups and communities. Being interpreted by the addressee user whose cultural (social and/or ethnic) identity can be different from that of the meme creator or sender user internet memes undergo a number of alterations trying to get the right interpretation. A cultural unit requires shared background knowledge within a community to be successfully interpreted, especially so if the meme creator belongs to a different culture. Thus, a meme should be altered (by available software) so that it obtains a certain shift in its cultural identity (in the textual or/and visual part), impacting the addressee's cultural identity and self-awareness. In other words, meme communication is not merely passing cultural units along to other internet users, it is about sharing and forming community bonds, and the meme loans under present study convincingly prove the fact.

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## 1. Introduction

A multimodal approach to communication in the contemporary discourse studies claims that all modes are meaning-making devices, with a mode regarded as “a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning” (Kress, 2009, p. 54). Jewitt (2016) claims that all communication is multimodal, therefore an adequate discourse analysis can be made only accounting for all the modes of communication as each mode has specific affordances, each with a specialized function, and those modes concurring together make combined meanings that may result in certain implications (Yus, 2018a). The interaction of modes has a significant role in the meaning making process.

Multimodal communication and representation of knowledge has gained high popularity in social semiotics (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Danielsson & Selander, 2016; Forceville, 2014; Jewitt, 2016; Ivarsson, Linderoth, & Saljo, 2008; Kress & Selander, 2012; Norris, 2011; Tang, Delgado, & Moje, 2014; Jaworski & Turlow, 2010) mainly due to the development of the internet-mediated communication and the pervasiveness of discourses combining all kinds of modes available on the Internet.

Internet memes as multimodal signs and cultural capital in web-based communities are being in the focus of numerous scholars engaged in studies of modality in recent years (Osterroth, 2018; Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016; Shifman, 2013a, 2013b; Danielsson & Selander, 2016; Kanashina, 2018; Diaz & Mauricio, 2013; Miltner, 2014; Zabrodskaya & Milani, 2014; Dynel, 2016; Kanai, 2016; Lainister & Voolaid, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Yus, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

In this paper such multimodal signs/texts as internet memes are explored as regards to their capacity of self-replicating, being used and transformed while communicated from person to person across communities so many times that they finally get a shift in their cultural identity.

## 2. Problem Statement

In technologically mediated communication of the participatory culture there are countless derivatives of cultural units called internet memes that are produced, imitated, remixed and rapidly diffused by countless participants (Dynel, 2016). In this chained meme communication, with each alteration, these cultural signs acquire new meanings and semiotic properties in order to be properly interpreted and understood by the target addressee user of a new community, on the one hand, and they often sustain the family resemblance with the original sign, making it possible to trace their etymology, on the other.

According to the traditional concept of the Net as a means of globalization, there are no technical barriers to stop meme communication. They can freely self-replicate and spread across net-working groups, with the free software available, reaching any user involved in the participatory culture of the global web. Memetic practice has become crucial in consolidation of communities within the participatory culture of Web 2.0, which is vividly represented by a memetic corpus highlighting the contours of existing and emerging cultural communities (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016).

However, having technical multimodal literacy in the internet participatory culture proves insufficient in effective “inter-” and “cross-community” communication in diverse ethnic cultures as far as all internet-users have originally come from some ethnic and social groups having common

background knowledge, social attitudes and expectations within their offline communities. Memetic activity meets both the yearning to be characteristic of participatory culture and the demand for individualism, the latter often bridging to the next community culture.

Meme communication is by no means a linear phenomenon as far as cultural identity is concerned. It is actually about “dynamic interplay of language, visual elements and other semiotic means of public signage” (Zabrodszkaya & Milani, 2014, p. 2) with “public signage” socially shaped within a certain community. The problem of language contact in the internet communication makes the matter even more complex: “new, more “ambiguous” sociolinguistic phenomena emerge that cannot be explained using a monolingual yardstick” (Zabrodszkaya & Milani, 2014, p. 4). This complexity seems self-evident in any intercultural and cross-cultural instances of communication and it also holds true in the intercultural meme communication, for example, in case of memes spreading from English-speaking communities to Russian-speaking users, which often results in the borrowing of these multimodal signs and their adaptation to the new cultural environment.

### **3. Research Questions**

The study of cultural identity shift in internet meme loans as multimodal signs and multimodal texts must be based on such semiotic phenomena as precedence, intertextuality and cultural identity in the picture-text combination.

There is no denying that intertextuality and precedence across printed texts, being well-studied subjects, hold true for multimodal texts and signs in internet-mediated environment as meme communication demands shared background knowledge, ideas and beliefs from both the sender and the recipient of the internet meme (Diaz & Mauricio, 2013; Miltner, 2014). Kanashina (2018) states that in their research work 81 memes out of 100 are characterized by precedence phenomena.

Thus, the research questions in this paper are

- a) What is the meaning-making process in such multimodal signs / texts as internet memes?
- b) What is the nature of precedence and intertextuality in internet memes?
- c) How is the cultural identity shift in the picture-text combination of internet memes realized?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

To explore an internet meme is to expose it to a multi-semiotic analysis and to properly understand the shift in cultural identity in meme loans is to understand the multi-semiotic nature of the internet meme.

So, the purpose of the study is to explore the semiosis process of meme communication resulting in cultural identity shift in some internet meme loans, i.e. to trace the integrated use of different modes during their transformations and how they jointly encode new meanings making implicate and explicate reference to one another in complex and intricate ways.

## 5. Research Methods

In the present research work, with a multimodal approach employed, we have studied one hundred internet meme instances originated from English-speaking communities and spread to the Runet communities.

## 6. Findings

Addressing to the research questions, in this section we present some findings of our study in text-picture combination memes spread from English-speaking community users to the Runet users (Fig. 01).



Figure 01. Internet memes and their Runet alterations

As regards to the visual part and the layout (organization structure) of the meme, in the chain of alterations and transformations there are numerous instances of the following types: a) ones with the

visual part unaltered, like in “Oh, really?” meme, this one being culturally neutral; b) ones with the picture slightly altered, like in “This is Bill” meme; c) ones with new images (“No time to explain”); d) ones with new images but the layout of the pictures unaltered (“Triggered” meme). Most meme alterations under study merely duplicate the visual part of the original or retain its visual resemblance sustained by the textual part (“Triggered” meme). In case of “No time to explain” meme alteration the new image usage is conditioned by certain difference in humour-related issues among English-speaking users and their Russian counterparts. The image of the famous Russian film character is more understandable and powerful for the Russian meme recipients, being sustained by a part of the popular Russian catchphrase “Net vremeni ob#yasnjat’ – nesite stulja” (“No time to explain - bring in the chairs”). The same goes with the “Triggered” meme: the face of the great Russian poet interacting with the text message “duel” (being the cause of his death) that is the part of the well-known brand name of canned food in Russia (*Bonduelle*) immediately catches attention of the Russian users. The feminist movement theme employed in the source meme is not popular among Russians. In the “This is Bill” meme the name of the boy was altered for “Petja”, a simple Russian name associated with a person who is regular in his life and does not do any extravagant or forbidden things. The Russian meme alteration describes the boy’s regular behavior when on the train – a more common environment for a young man with his regular habits.

Thus, the internet meme loans represented in the findings section appear to be interesting examples demonstrating the interaction of the visual and textual parts each adding to the cohesion of the whole multimodal sign / text making a shift in their cultural identity.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, talking about culture and cultural identity, we mainly mean relatively stable representations found in the minds of a community members. In the internet-mediated communication individuals participate in the shaping of social networks sharing similar cultural (ethnic and/or social) identities through meme communication based on intertextuality, a central feature in social bonding. So, when a meme is spread to a community of another culture, it gets involved in a new semiosis process undergoing a number of alterations in its picture-text combination until it impacts the addressee user’s cultural identity.

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