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War memes: language transformations after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Меми війни: мовні трансформації після російського вторгнення в Україну

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Abstract

The study of media viruses and memes that have emerged as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a relevant interdisciplinary approach that brings together philology, cultural studies, history, psychology, social communications and social sciences. Memes ("bavovna", "zeleni cholovichky") have become not only symbols-viruses, but also effective means of mass communication and expression of national identity.

The study of memes includes the following aspects: a selection of headline titles with a meme component, analysis of their semantics; disclosure of the social and cultural context and history of events that led to their emergence; study of perceptions and reactions to memes, their impact; determination of the role of memes in order to form public consciousness.


The study of the "bavovna" and "zeleni cholovichky" memes was carried out on the basis of online media headlines in Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian and English, which provides a wide range of analysis and clarification of the impact


Анотація


У дослідженні медіа-вірусів і мемів, які з'явилися внаслідок російського вторгнення в Україну, використано актуальний міждисциплінарний підхід, який об'єднує філологію, культурологію, історію, психологію, соціальні комунікації та соціальні науки. Меми («бавовна», «зелені чоловічки») стали не лише символами-вірусами, а й ефективними засобами масової комунікації та вираження національної ідентичності.


Аналіз мемів має такі аспекти: виділення заголовків із мемним компонентом, аналіз їх семантики; розкриття соціокультурного контексту та історії подій, що призвели до їх виникнення; вивчення сприйняття та реакції на меми, їхнього впливу; визначення ролі мемів у формуванні суспільної свідомості.


Меми «бавовна» та «зелені чоловічки» вивчали на основі заголовків інтернет-ЗМІ українською, польською, литовською та англійською мовами, що дає широкий спектр аналізу та з'ясування впливу цих елементів на

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of these memes on different cultures and societies, interpretation of events and realities related to the war in Ukraine.

The use of memes as components of media headlines demonstrates the importance of the information space and its impact on the perception of geopolitical events and threats. The media use these symbols to emphasise the seriousness of issues, shape positions, and provoke discussion. This approach helps to understand better the important factors of society, the relationship with historical events and political realities, the specifics of the emergence of new memes, algorithms for their transformation into viruses, and the peculiarities of development, spread and transformation in social media.

Keywords: media viruses, memes, semantics, transformations, English language, Lithuanian language, Polish language.

Introduction

Media viruses are used to spread information rapidly on a large scale in the media space. Media viruses describe ideas, events, and phenomena with the speed and scope of spread characteristic of a virus. Media viruses as content are gaining popularity due to the large number of audience reach, comments, reactions and reposts on social media and media platforms.

Memes are responsible for the spread of media viruses. Memes can take different forms (graphic images, phrases, videos, gestures, behavioural patterns, etc.); they can be humorous, political, cultural, and reflect any aspect of life. They are usually spread through social networks, media, and communication between people.

The specific objectives of this study are to analyze the impact of the memes that emerged after the Russian military invasion of Ukraine on public opinion, culture and society. Specifically, the following aspects will be studied:

- the role of memes in the spread of information about the war in Ukraine.
- the influence of memes on the formation of public opinion about the war in Ukraine.
- the impact of memes on Ukrainian culture and society as well.

The study of memes that arose after Russia's military invasion in Ukraine ("bavovna", "zeleni cholovichky") is a relevant interdisciplinary study that combines philology, cultural studies,

різні культури та суспільства, інтерпретацію подій і реалій, пов'язаних з війною в Україні.

Використання мемів як компонентів заголовків у ЗМІ демонструє важливість інформаційного простору та його вплив на сприйняття геополітичних подій і загроз. Медіа використовують ці символи, щоб підкреслити серйозність питань, сформувані позицію та розкрити дискусійні питання. Такий підхід допомагає краще зрозуміти важливі чинники суспільства, зв'язок з історичними подіями та політичними реаліями, специфіку появи нових мемів, алгоритми їх перетворення на віруси, особливості розвитку, поширення та трансформації в соціальних мережах.

Ключові слова: медіавіруси, мему, семантика, трансформації, англійська мова, литовська мова, польська мова.

history, psychology, social communications and social sciences.

Theoretical Framework

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine has given a number of memes that have had a great impact on public opinion and culture. For example, the "bavovna" meme, which depicts a cotton plant with an open boll, became a reference to a series of explosions due to a mistake in its translation into Russian. The term "media virus" does not have a specific author or definition, as the concept has become popular among media researchers and the public. Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Gladwell, 2000), discusses the impact of media viruses on society and culture. Jonah Berger, in his book *Contagious. Why Things Catch On* (Berger, 2016), examines how ideas and information spread through social networks and media, and explores the factors that influence the virality of content. Douglas Rushkoff, in *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (Rushkoff, 1994), uses the term "media virus" to analyse the impact of the media on society and the spread of ideas through media channels. Karen Nelson-Field, in her work *Viral Marketing: The Science of Sharing* (Field, 2013), analyses the psychology and social dynamics underlying viral marketing, the mechanisms of creating content that has the potential to become viral. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, in *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked*

Culture (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013), explore the phenomenon of social interaction in digital networks, the consumers' role in the process of dissemination and distribution of information, the importance of their involvement and interaction in the media sphere and the impact of these processes on the media industry.

Douglas Rushkoff classifies viral messages in the media into three main groups. The first group includes messages that are created intentionally; the second group includes messages that are created accidentally but quickly adapted to specific needs; the third group includes messages that arise on their own, without the influence of external factors, they are self-sufficient and attractive (Rushkoff, 1994).

The term "meme" was coined by the British ethologist Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976) to denote an idea, concept, image, or behavior that can be transmitted from person to person by imitation or copying, similar to how genes transmit from generation to generation in the biological evolutionary process. Thus, a "meme" is a cultural unit that can be spread and reproduced in society.

In Ukraine, the functioning of media viruses is covered in the works L. Kompantseva (2020) (media viruses as a genre of Internet communication); H. Semeniuk (2012) (media viruses against the background of the evolutionary processes of the media space); K. Sokolova (2012) (memes as means of communication in the Internet environment).

The "bavovna" and "little green men" memes have become the most relevant since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Starting in 2014, when Russian troops entered the Crimean peninsula, the term "little green men" acquired a negative meaning as it was associated with the military invasion. Analysis of positive statements by social media users about the successes of the Ukrainian armed forces on the battlefield is associated with the "bavovna" meme.

Methodology

The research methodology primarily includes general scientific methods of analysis, synthesis and qualitative sampling, which made it possible to determine the object; collect data; analyze the origin and semantics of memes. Descriptive methods are used, in particular the method of typology, which is focused on the search for stable features and properties of the studied objects. The method of typological analysis made

it possible to study the sociocultural context; explore the perception and reactions of the audience, the impact on society; outline algorithms for the spread of memes in social networks, their transformation and evolution, find out the role in the formation of public consciousness and the reflection of national identity.

The method of studying texts is involved, namely content analysis as a method of collecting data on the phenomenon or process under study. For the automated search for information, the content monitoring was used, which is caused by the need to systematically track trends and processes in a constantly updated information environment.

The article also uses Case Study method – a method of qualitative research in the social sciences, which involves the study of a single social object in order to comprehend a wider class of similar cases. In the context of this article is a study of memes that emerged after Russia's military invasion of Ukraine for a generalized explanation of the phenomenon of the appearance and spread of memes in the Internet space.

Criteria for memes selection: relevance to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine; virality and popularity; variety of themes and formats; geographical and cultural representation; evolution over time.

Limitations of the study. Sampling bias is that the study's reliance on online sources may introduce some sampling bias. Temporal Constraints: the study's focus on memes which had emerged after the invasion may not fully capture the historical context and nuances leading up to the event. The analysis is limited to a specific time frame. Ethical Considerations: due to the nature of the topic, ethical concerns may arise in the selection and analysis of certain memes. Generalizability: while Case Study methodology provides in-depth insights into a specific context, generalizing findings to a broader context may be challenging.

Results and Discussion

The origin of the "Bavovna" meme. In the 2010s, Russia began to introduce actively the "new language" and the "regime of information assistance", which were expressed in the artificial creation of words with the change of concepts using euphemisms. The main purpose of using this method is to simplify the perception of various events, including natural disasters and

military events. One of the most significant steps in this process was the transition of the Russian media to the use of the word "khlopók" (Ukrainian: "liask") to refer to explosions. Even with serious explosions with a significant number of victims, the term "khlopók" was used. Instead, other languages use the lexemes ukr. "vybukh", pol. "wybuch", "eksplozja", lit. "sprogimas", English. "explosion".

Semantics of the "Bavovna" meme. It is worth to note that the word "khlopók" in Russian has a homograph – "khlópok", in Ukrainian – "bavovna". The meme was created in response to the events in Bryansk in April 2022, when explosions occurred in a military unit and an oil depot. The news about these events was translated from Russian sources using an online translator, which misinterpreted the context and made a mistake with the choice of words, so the text in Ukrainian could be read as "pered pochatkom pozhezhi chulasia potuzhna bavovna". This misunderstanding became the basis for the creation of the meme and its spread on the Internet (Visit Ukraine, 07.10.2023).

Since then, the word "bavovna" has been used in the Ukrainian segment of the Internet to refer to explosions in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and Russia: Sezon "bavovny" u Krymu tryvatyme shche do vho - Humeniuk (Ukrinform, 20.07.2023); Do bielhoroda vnochi zavitala bavovna: shcho vidomo (Ukrinform, 17.01.2023); "Bavovna" in Kreminna znyshchyla maizhe 400 zaharbnykiv - Haidai (Ukrinform, 05.09.2022); Dva holovni varyanty i odyn ukrainskyi: Reznikov nazvav dzherela "bavovny" v Rosii (24 channel, 20.08.2023); "Bavovna" zavitala do Rostova i Kaluhu (galinfo, 21.08.2023). Korotko pro 18 serpnia: ZSU atakuiut, "bavovna" u Moskvi i F-16 dlia Ukrainy (TSN, 18.08.2023). In our opinion, the cases of fixing the word "bavovna" in the headlines in the direct meaning of plants are interesting, although in these contexts additional semantic connotations and the connection with the meme are preserved: "Bavovny" bahato ne buvae: volonteriy prodaiut roslyny zadlia dopomohy "Hospitalieram" (Dim, 21.08.2023).

Thus, the "bavovna" meme spread rapidly in social media, websites and media platforms in a short time. We note the processes of migration and borrowing of memes from the Ukrainian language to other languages due to a number of factors and mechanisms.

With this in mind, let us consider the mechanisms of borrowing the meme "bawełna" in Polish. The

meme "bawełna" in Polish is used to describe events related primarily to the war in Ukraine. In the context of the headlines we can understand the meme "bawełna" as explosions in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and Russia, which cause fear and panic among the occupier: "Bawełny będzie dużo! Dlaczego Rosjanie tak się jej boją, że aż uciekają z Krymu?" (Gazeta Wyborcza, 23.08.2022); Od hełmów do obrony elektronicznej. Ukraine: "Bawełna" wspiera obronę (Defence 24, 25.07.2023); "Bawełna" w Rosji. Tego Putin tej nocy się nie spodziewał (WP, 02.01.2023); Panika w rosyjskim wojsku przez wybuchy w Mariupolu. Ukrainian army informs, how Russians have been attacking "bawełnę" (Gazeta prawna, 26.02.2023); "Tajemnicza bawełna" in akcji. Krym zaatakowany, zniszczone rosyjskie pociski (Salon 24, 21.03.2023).

The origin of the meme "zeleni cholovichky." The meme "zeleni cholovichky" appeared in February-March 2014, when armed Russian troops entered the Crimea, dressed in a green military uniform without identification marks. This meme played an important role in attracting international attention to the events in Ukraine and establishing links between Russia and military aggression in Ukraine, despite its refutation of its participation in the conflict.

Semantics of the meme "zeleni cholovichky". The term originally came into use to refer to aliens after reports about UFO in the 1950s; accordingly, we record single titles with this meaning: Zeleni cholovichky. Ucheni ne zaperechiut, shcho u Vsesviti mozhut zhyty liudynopodibni istoty (Fokus, 25.11.2021). At the present stage, the meme reflects the unofficial nature of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Visim rokiv okupatsii Krymu: yak "zeleni cholovichky" z Rosii zakhopyly ukrainskyi pivostriv (Uainfo, 20.02.2022); V okupovanomu Krymu oblyly farboiu pamiatnyk rosiiskym "zelenym cholovichkam" (TSN, 28.01.2019); Putin vpershe vyznav, shcho "zeleni cholovichky" - yogo viiskovi (Ukrainian pravda, 17.04.2014). We record the use of memes to reflect Russian aggression and military intervention in other countries: "Zeleni cholovichky" Putina rushly do Minska (DailyLviv, 20.08.2020); U Moldovi vzhe zavylysia rosiiski "zeleni cholovichky", yaki verbuiut naimantsiv (TSN, 08.09.2014), as well as cases of introduction of the relevant term and concept into national legislation: U Finliandii zaboronyly "zelenykh cholovichkiv" (VolynPost, 16.07.2017). We highlight the use of the meme in comparative contexts: unofficial

actions of armed persons (capture, invasion) in military or camouflage uniform without identification marks: "Bukovel" atakuiut "zeleni cholovichky" (Konkurent News Agency, 26.09.2018); Herashchenko vyklykaiut na profilnyi komitet cherez yii porivniannia nardepiv zi «Sluhy narodu» iz «zelenymy cholovichkami» (TSN, 11.09.2019). Noteworthy are the names of American tabloids, in which during the protests in Washington, the presence on the streets of armed people without identification marks is directly compared with the Russian green men who flooded the city: Pid chas protestiv u Vashynhtoni pomityly "zelenykh cholovichkiv": khto vony - v ohliadi ZMI (BBC News Ukraina, 08.06.2020). The context in which the meme was used in relation to the infiltration of armed people from Belarus into Poland is shown: "Zeleni cholovichky" zivnylysia vzhe y u Polshchi (Hlavkom, 04.11.2021).

In Polish, the meme "zielone ludziki" is consistently presented in headlines in similar meanings and contexts to those in Ukrainian: Brejza: Rząd PiS nie powinien spotykać się z "zielonymi ludzikami" Putina (Rzeczpospolita, 22.02.2022). We distinguish the names of illegal military seizure not only of territories but also of objects: "Małe, zielone ludziki" zajęły ukraiński statek ratunkowy. "To piractwo" (Rzeczpospolita, 09.03.2022).

Most examples of the meme being used to reflect Russian aggression and military intervention in other countries were recorded: Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Kamiński: Nie pozwolimy, żeby przy granicy biegały zielone ludziki (Gazeta Wyborcza, 27.07.2023); Zielone ludziki w Wenezueli (Fakt, 28.01.2019); Zielone ludziki u Łukaszenki? (Rzeczpospolita, 29.07.2020); Co w Rosji piszczy? Rosyjskie psy wojny na straży Maduro, czyli zielone ludziki poleciały w tropiki (Gazeta Wyborcza, 26.01.2019); Łukaszenka boi się zielonych ludzików Putina (Gazeta Wyborcza, 13.03.2015). We highlight the use of the meme in articles describing possible attacks by Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups on the territory of Russia: Ukraińcy też mają swoje zielone ludziki (Gazeta Wyborcza, 23.05.2023), as well as in the context of measures to counter and prevent military intervention by little green men: Zielone ludziki chcą nam zabrać surowce, czyli największe w tym roku manewry NATO (Gazeta Wyborcza, 21.09.2017). The practice of using memes in comparative contexts is also consistent: Zielone ludziki prezesa. Zachód powinien traktować ludzi Kaczyńskiego tak, jak

traktował ludzi Putina po ataku Rosji na Krym (Gazeta Wyborcza, 16.12.2017); Kreml wypiera się hakerów w USA jak "zielonych ludzików" na Krymie - niby nie nasi, ale orderzy dostaną (Gazeta Wyborcza, 28.07.2016); Finansowa wojna hybrydowa w Mołdawii. Zielone zamiast zielonych ludzików (Gazeta Wyborcza, 15.08.2016).

English-language publications in the UK and America have also been using the "little green men" meme in headlines since 2014. The contexts refer to events related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The analytics of the materials aims to identify the Russian military: Ukraine crisis: Meeting the little green men (BBC News, 30.04.2014); "Little green men" or "Russian invaders?" (BBC News, 11.03.2014) (the article contains subheadings: Polite men, Little green men, Russian invaders, which are different names for the same concept). We would like to highlight the use of the meme in a figurative sense in relation to armed, camouflaged people without identifying markers who were involved in the United States during the protests: Why is Donald Trump using little green men in American cities? (The Washington Post, 22.07.2020). Special attention should be paid to the headlines in which the meme is used with the opposite meaning, when the concept of "little green men" can lead to serious negative consequences for the aggressor country and anti-Kremlin little green men can already carry out offensive actions on the territory of Russia: Belgorod attack: Ukraine has turned Putin's little green men against him (The Telegraph, 23.04.2023).

The title names of Lithuanian Internet media actively use the meme "žalieji žmogeliukai" in view of the possible risks of the development of aggression similar to the Ukrainian scenario: Jei ateitų "žalieji žmogeliukai," Lietuvos kariai stovėtų nuleidę ginklus? (Lrt.lt, 14.12.2014); Latviai bijo „žaliųjų žmogeliukų“ iš Rusijos ir hibridinio karo (Lrt.lt, 20.04.2015). We also record analytical materials on the struggle and counteraction to armed groups: Žalių jų žmogeliukų istorija: receptų, kaip elgtis su niekieno pajėgomis, yra (15min.lt, 06.04.2016); regarding the identification of participants of Russian aggression other than green men: Ne vien žalieji žmogeliukai - Krymo aneksijoje aktyviai dalyvavo ir Maskvos popai (Lrt.lt, 19.03.2020). We also highlight the titles of articles in which the meme is used in the context of Russian military aggression against Ukraine: Vėl pasirodys "Žalieji žmogeliukai?" Skelbiamas pavojus - juda didžiulė karinė kolona be

skiriamųjų ženklų (Technologijos.lt, 24.02.2023), and in relation to other countries (Syria, Belarus): Sirijos kare - naujas posūkis: prie Rusijos aviacijos prisijungė ir "žalieji žmogeliukai" (Lrt.lt, 12.10.2015); "Žalieji žmogeliukai" jau Minske. Kas toliau?" (Lrt.lt, 31.08.2020). There are a number of examples of the transformation of meme semantics in comparative contexts, in which, in particular, refugees (migrants) are equated with "little green men": Pabėgėliai - žalieji žmogeliukai Europai? (Darbopartija.lt, 07.03.2016); Pabėgėliai – žalieji žmogeliukai? (Silales-artojas.lt, 12.07.2021); Radikali Kuodžio idėja dėl Baltarusijos migrantų: siūlo juos sodinti ir prilyginti žaliams žmogeliukams (Delfi.lt, 02.07.2021). Comparative contexts are also used in headings with a meme-composite: Žirvintas atvyksta "žalieji žmogeliukai" (Sirvinta.net, 10.09.2022). At the same time, the comparison of political protests of the League of Young Conservatives (interference in the internal affairs of a foreign municipality) with green men is accompanied by a lengthy description of their appearance in Ukraine.

Conclusions

The results of the study made it possible to clarify the mechanisms of functioning of media viruses, to single out the most important algorithms for interlanguage borrowing of text memes. First of all these are translation and adaptation (memes and viral content can be easily translated into other languages and adapted to a new audience); historical connections (international relations promote the spread of memes and viral content from one language to another, and the commonality and unity of positions create common conceptual points that facilitate their understanding); multicultural communities (global networks and social media facilitate the exchange of popular content; a meme popular in one community is borrowed and adapted to its contexts in another); media globalization (a meme or viral content intended for a global audience can easily move from one language to another).

Thus, media viruses migrate from one language to another due to the global possibilities of the Internet and communication, as well as due to common cultural and historical points that facilitate their understanding and spread in different linguistic environments.

The "bavovna" and "zeleni cholovichky" memes are not only popular, they have become an important part of media culture in Ukraine and

other countries, and are actively used in headlines and articles in various media to attract readers' attention.

The use of memes by the media of other countries is primarily associated with Russian military aggression in Ukraine, which demonstrates the strong condemnation of any interference in the territory of independent states.

Comparative contexts of memes demonstrate transformation and expansion of semantics. Journalists and media compare "little green men" with other phenomena. It can be interpreted as analogies between different situations and challenges for society.

The use of memes as components of media headlines demonstrates the importance of the information space and its impact on the perception of geopolitical events and threats. The media use these symbols to emphasise the seriousness of issues, shape positions, and provoke discussion.

The general trend is that memes play an important role in the media space of different countries, helping society to perceive and analyse geopolitical events and risks.

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