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## SYSTEM-FUNCTIONAL FEATURES OF SEMIOTIC MECHANISMS ORGANIZING INTERNET MEMES ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

The article studies semiotic mechanisms of organizing Internet memes on coronavirus (COVID-19) as polycode texts reflecting the socio-cultural phenomenon significant for an indefinite period. It also examines relevant evaluative meanings of COVID-19 arising through the interaction of image and text in polycode units. Systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis serves as the research methodology and provides the framework for linguistic, cognitive and pragmatic aspects of the study. In line with the approach, a comprehensive interpretation of a communication act incorporating text analysis along with situational and cultural reflection, the inductive method and its main research procedures (observation, analysis and comparison) are applied to specify the COVID-19 discourse in Internet memes. The analysis of the system-functional peculiarities of coronavirus-related Internet memes has specified textual means of designing a communicative intention in polycode units, semiotic elements of pragmatic impact, as well as a multimodal perspective of interpreting the COVID-19 discourse through the interaction of verbal and visual references. The results show that COVID-19 memes convey condition-, interaction- and event-oriented evaluative meanings. The study revealed that the semiotic tools of different origin and precedence degree enable verbal-visual interaction to convey the sense of kinship and shared experience. Along with the disturbing meanings of apprehension and danger, the Internet memes noticeably express social unity and confidence in overcoming the challenges. The meanings are reinforced by the images of significant cultural value in the Russian community.

*Keywords:* polycode text, multimodality, Internet meme, pragmatic impact, semiotic code, COVID-19 discourse, precedent phenomenon.

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### СИСТЕМО-ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ СЕМИОТИЧЕСКИХ МЕХАНИЗМОВ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ИНТЕРНЕТ-МЕМОВ О КОРОНАВИРУСНОЙ ИНФЕКЦИИ

В статье анализируются семиотические механизмы организации интернет-мемов, посвященных коронавирусу (COVID-19). На материале поликодовых текстов, отражающих значимый на неопределенный

срок социокультурный феномен, исследуются релевантные оценочные значения, возникающие в поликодовых единицах в результате взаимодействия изображения и текста. Методологией исследования лингвистических, когнитивных и прагматических аспектов объекта послужил системно-функциональный мультимодальный дискурс-анализ. В соответствии с выбранным подходом для детализации дискурса COVID-19 в интернет-мемах была использована комплексная интерпретация коммуникативного акта, включающая анализ текста наряду с ситуативной и культурологической рефлексией, индуктивный метод и его основные исследовательские процедуры (наблюдение, анализ и сравнение). Анализ системно-функциональных особенностей интернет-мемов о коронавирусной инфекции позволил выявить специфические текстовые средства оформления коммуникативной интенции в поликодовых единицах, номенклатуру семиотических элементов прагматического воздействия, а также наметить полимодальный ракурс интерпретации дискурса COVID-19 через взаимодействие вербальных и визуальных референций. В результате исследования мемов о COVID-19 выявлены обобщенные оценочные значения, связанные с понятиями состояния, взаимодействия и события. В ходе исследования установлено, что семиотические средства разной референциальной отнесенности и степени прецедентности позволяют в вербально-визуальном взаимодействии передавать чувства единения и общего опыта. Наряду с манифестацией опасения и опасности интернет-мемы выражают социальное единство и уверенность в преодолении трудностей. Установленные значения усиливаются образами, имеющими значительную культурную ценность в русскоязычном сообществе.

*Ключевые слова:* поликодовый текст, мультимодальность, интернет-мем, прагматическое воздействие, семиотический код, дискурс COVID-19, прецедентный феномен.

## Introduction

The emergence and spread of COVID-19 has significantly changed the life of society and caused the introduction of new social practices (remote work or study, self-isolation, etc.). With the spread of the pandemic, the COVID-19 discourse has reached the global level incorporating local communities, authorities, the healthcare sector and the media. In the context of lockdown and imposed social distancing, social media became an operational tool to connect with others, share information, experiences and opinions, as well as to consider the situation and find the ways to adapt to it. Diverse semiotic options employed in the ongoing interpretation found their reflection in numerous Internet memes as creative responses of netizens. Being polymodal cultural units, which are commonly ironic or humorous by nature, memes circulate in digital media

and convey different interpretations of “coronavirus” as a new precedent phenomenon of our time.

Numerous works within linguistics domain are devoted to the analysis of COVID-19-inspired lexical processes. Against this background, the aim of the work is to fill the research gap associated with the diverse semiotic resources used in reflecting the COVID-19 discourse. COVID-related memes highlight various facets of the phenomenon ranging from the virus itself to its origin, the spread, changes in social life arrangement, protective measures, local and global economic impact and other. Since the mediated COVID-19 discourse enacts a diversity of opinions and thematic discourses it cannot be comprehensively evaluated without reference to the pragmatics of sociolinguistic semiotics of the speech community. The focus of the study is to consider text-image interaction within COVID-19 memes and specify relevant evaluative meanings of COVID-19 as conveyed through certain semiotic mechanisms used in polycode units.

## **Methods and material**

Numerous studies have viewed social media in terms of semiotic instrumental potential [Tan 2020; Stöckl 2020]. The framework for this study is the combination of mediated discourse analysis (MDA) and systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis (SF MDA) [Norris, 2005; Scollon, 2001]. They highlight sociocultural aspects within digitally mediated communication and focus on the convergence of various semiotic resources in social practices. SF MDA operates meaning-making through a set of methods, namely framing, composition and relevance [Kress, Leeuwen, 1996], theme and information structure [Halliday, 1989] and image-text logico-semantic relations [Martinec, 2005]. The present study adopts SF MDA to COVID-related memes to unveil how the polycode units operate text-image relations to convey socially and culturally relevant evaluative meanings of the phenomenon.

Social semiotics stipulates the concept that communication necessitates participants to make the messages comprehensible in line with the context [Kress, Leeuwen, 2001]. Hence, meme production is defined by the use of semiotic resources relevant to an individual in a specific social environment. The relevance concept equally concerns the viral potential of a meme and / or its constituent parts. Semiotic means of expression (e.g. images, visual structuring, and verbal elements) create meaningful propositions bound up with interests and concerns of the source community. Hence, these propositions reveal significant semantic dimension related to COVID-19 discourse.

Since “representation requires that sign-makers choose forms for the expression of what they have in mind, forms which they see as most apt and plausible in the given context) [Kress, Leeuwen, 2001, p.13], it gives space to account for multimodal features expressed by culturally and contextually relevant intertextual elements, images, their origin and relevance for the community in question. The analysis followed a number of steps: 1) data retrieval of Internet memes featuring COVID-19 topic from online platforms accumulating memes (Memepedia (2022), Fishki.net (2022) and Pikabu (2021); 2) theme reference identification (verbal and / or image indication of COVID-19), 3) analysis of visual / verbal elements and their semantics, 4) the interpretation of visual and verbal code interplay; 6) analysis-based inference about generalized evaluative meaning conveyed by the meme.

Four hundred and twenty Internet memes were collected over a period starting from the spread of the virus to May 2021. Capturing the development of the “COVID” precedent phenomenon from its early use gives insight into the intended meanings of the speakers due to the interplay of codes in polymodal objects. The selection of memes was classified in line with the generalized evaluative meanings they convey. The semiotic codes the mechanisms used to convey the evaluative meanings were analyzed within each group. Following general observations, the most representative Internet-memes were selected for illustration and in-depth analysis.

## Literature Review

New modes of Internet communication provide an abundance of perspectives for the analysis of information exchange features. Being highly adaptive and tuned to meet the participants’ needs, social media offer a platform for “one-to-one and one-to-many communication” [Jensen, 2015, p.1]. Some earlier studies accounted for computer-mediated communication and focused on the social context and the concept of language use stipulated by the given situation [Danet, 2007; Marcoccia, 2008]. Recent studies give a greater stress on multimodality of Internet communication and account for various semiotic forms and mechanisms involved in it [Jewitt, 2016; Marchenko, 2019]. A number of studies examined multimodality in different platforms: YouTube discourse [Benson, 2017], WhatsApp status messages [Sánchez-Moya, 2015] and emoticons in WhatsApp [Sampietro, 2016]. These studies foster the idea that each code employed in interaction as a social semiotic resource actualizes a specific function. The claims emerge mostly from Halliday’s social semiotics, which serves the groundwork for systemic functional multimodal

approaches [Kress, Leeuwen, 1996], that emphasize peculiarities in which signs combine in multimodal contexts to convey different meanings.

COVID-19 discourse in media has been investigated both in terms of traditional media — news reports, articles, headlines, etc. [Luporini, 2021], and the new media — social media posts and messages. The researches highlight the COVID-19 mediated discourse in terms of multivocality of written and visual communication, functional multimodal discourse analysis and word usage strategies. The studies reveal that the use of different modes (e.g. text, image, audio, video) create both multimodal and multivocal discourses.

The findings in specifically lexical studies highlight the emergence and the use of COVID-19 neologisms, semantic shifts and other lexical processes [Mweri, 2021; Prekazi, 2021; Roig-Marín, 2020]; and view the phenomenon in the light of metaphoric conceptualization and demonstrate how the pandemic is framed in the discourse with metaphors [Craig, 2020].

This research addresses semiotic mechanisms employed in COVID-related Internet memes as polycode texts in which people express their opinions and concerns about personally and socially relevant topics.

## Results and Discussions

The significance of the pandemic and its consequences has spurred the use of 'COVID-19' lexeme, coinage of various neologisms and numerous posts, memes included. The development of the semantic and associative potential of the phenomenon in question is underway, yet certain specific meanings can be traced. The analysis of the interaction of semiotic codes and generalized evaluative meanings indicates the semantic shades of a historic event or crucial period that has affected the lives of people and compelled to reassess the basics of social interaction, hygiene and other aspects of human activity.

COVID-19 memes clearly trace the chronology of events related to the pandemic (disease outbreak and its localization, discussion of the possibility / inevitability of spread on a national / global scale, the reaction of official authorities / individual feedback, lockdown, self-isolation, etc.), current events of the national and international level. At the initial stage, the coronavirus memes reflect the concepts of unemployment, poverty and decay. The polymodal units under consideration feature other episodes of the news agenda, for instance, a container ship that ran aground in the Suez Canal on March 23, 2021. The diachronic analysis suggests that the relevance and recurrence of generalized evaluative meanings manifested

in Internet memes is volatile. While some meanings are periodically re-interpreted and updated (e.g. unpredictability and rapid development of the situation), others remain chronologically attached to a certain stage in the development of events (in particular, vigilance regarding the security of packages from the world-famous virtual marketplace, stayhome, stop-coronavirus hashtags, etc.).

Overall, the Internet memes with the evaluative conceptualization of COVID-19 convey contrary hyperbolic meanings, e.g. the most appalling virus vs an unremarkable virus, insurmountable circumstances vs minor obstacles, the absence of a medicine as a fatal circumstance vs a product from the daily diet as a panacea for a disease, etc. For example, the meme in Fig. 1 presents a hypothetical situation in which a man is concerned about the lady sneezing, yet the reassurance that it is a TB rather than a coronavirus symptom relieves the tension. Thus, the opposition is manifested: coronavirus (high degree of danger) — another serious infectious disease (minimal degree of danger).

The verbal exchange is reinforced with the visual code featuring the same image of a couple having a conversation over a cup of coffee. Since the visual code suggests similar emotions in both parts of the message, the contradiction is delivered through the verbal part.

In some cases, COVID-related memes feature contrast through juxtaposition of both integrated codes, e.g. the meme in Fig. 2. The verbal part of the message serves the headline for the images below and trans-



Fig. 1. Symptoms meme

## ОНИ СРАЖАЛИСЬ ЗА ЗДОРОВЫЙ МИР



Fig. 2. The 'fight' meme

lates as “They fought for a healthy world”. The visual code demonstrates casual patterns of pastime like playing games, contemplation and taking a nap. The oxymoronic contradiction emerges from the interplay of peaceful images and the ‘fight’ semantics implying taking some actions in order to achieve the set goal.

A special note to be given to the attributes associated with COVID, namely the coronavirus molecule, a protective mask, gloves, a screen, a sanitizer, a coronavirus test tube, etc. Due to extensive mass media coverage and multiple channels for replicating the messages, COVID-19 has developed a set of intrinsically associated and well-known symbols. Yet, the ongoing update of recommendations/requirements for preventive measures and the dynamics of the pandemic continuously prompt re-thinking of their value and axiological shades of meaning. We illustrate this observation with the following examples.

With the skyrocketing demand for personal protection in the early stages of the pandemic, internet memes manifested the high value of masks. So, Fig. 3 shows a photograph of V. Mayakovsky reciting verses. The photo is edited with the image of a protective mask added to the raised hand of the poet.

The verbal code is a transformed precedent text referring to the poet’s work “A Poem about the Soviet Passport” (1929). The original verse says about the subject of pride, namely the passport: “Read this and envy me, I am a citizen of the Soviet Union”. The precedent lines are transformed and concern the possibilities provided by a mask: the person can go shopping and use the public transport. The metrics of the original verse is preserved





Fig. 3. The mask meme



Fig. 4. The 'deadly virus' meme

which in line with the visual code enhances the effect of authenticity. Yet, certain memes question the efficiency of a protective mask in an ironic way, e.g. Fig.4.

The meme above features four captions demonstrating different types of masks. The captions say (from top to bottom, left to right): dust, pesticides, radiation, deadly virus. Three pictures show the appropriate masks used specifically for the protection against the pollution indicated in the caption, while the one in the lower right corner displays a model wear-





Fig. 5. The 'fuss' meme

ing a textile safety mask. The opposition emerging from the image of the least sophisticated mask and the caption claiming the protection against a lethal virus serves the basis for ironical interpretation.

The image of the coronavirus molecule, which is inextricably linked with the concept under consideration, also appears to be precedent and is employed in memes both in realistic 3D format and in the variant of simplified vector graphics.

In Fig. 5 the compilation of the image of a molecule and a text meme popular on social media (it says: Wanna make a fuss) creates an ironic reference to the current context, precisely the life in the context of the spread of coronavirus infection. Apparently, the achievement of an ironic effect in this case does not depend on the awareness of the precedent text and its social background, although it enhances the polyphony of meanings. The phrase can be interpreted as an expression of the desire to move on to active actions, to relax and do something extraordinary, which, in the context of a non-verbal code, is logically deduced to specific activities and conditions.

The widespread impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the social and economic life of society, the alarming state caused by the fundamentally new circumstances of work and study, were also reflected in numerous Internet memes. As in other thematic areas of COVID-19 conceptualization in polymodal units, changes in social interaction have a dual representation. Accordingly, the reflection over social distancing in the context of talk shows is represented in Fig. 6 as verbal / visual analogy. The meme is split into two horizontal parts by a text saying 'Talk shows with social distance remind Jedi High Council'. The photo on the top features a screenshot of a popular show, while the caption at the bottom demonstrates an administrative body, the Jedi Council, from the Star Wars series.



Ток-шоу с социальной дистанцией  
начинают напоминать совет джедаев



*Fig. 6.* The 'Jedi Council' meme

Along with such an ironically official and pompous interpretation, there are concepts / phenomena that are opposed to COVID-19 as even less desirable, requiring avoidance (e. g. toxic and dull people).

## Conclusions

The analysis of semiotic mechanisms of organizing COVID-19 Internet memes allows us to draw the following conclusions. The emergence and spread of COVID-19 has radically changed the life of society and provoked the introduction of new practices of social interaction. The uniqueness of the situation, permanent uncertainty and new experience of social communications are reflected in Internet memes about the coronavirus as a new precedent phenomenon of our time, as well as related phenomena. The analysis of Internet memes provides an idea of content and pragmatic components of the modern polycode text and cultural space as a form of existence of culture in the human mind. The associative field of the emerging precedent phenomenon includes such concepts as a fateful event affecting the interests of all people, reassessment of the foundations of social interaction, hygiene, protection measures, various human activities, unpredictability and rapid development of the situation, vigilance in relation to biological safety.

The results show that COVID-19 memes convey condition-, interaction- and event-oriented evaluative meanings. The meanings emerging from the interplay of semiotic codes reveal contrary hyperbolic

pairs: the most terrible virus — a trivial virus, insurmountable circumstances — minor obstacles, the absence of a medicine as a fatal circumstance — a product from the daily diet as a panacea for a disease, etc. The linguistic component of the phenomenon under consideration, reflected in memes, also reveals binary connotative opposition: coronavirus — ordinary, familiar, everyday, COVID-19 — official, significant, dominant.

Currently we trace an intermediate stage in the formation of COVID-19 evaluative potential. The formation process will continue at the next stages of the narrative, when the volume of discursive practice gradually accumulates, and the phenomenon is understood from the point of view of its categorical characteristics. The universal precedent phenomenon, which is socially and culturally significant for an indefinite period, requires interpretation in terms of the form, methods and specifics of reflection in mass communication, as it represents a comprehension of a unique phenomenon of individual and collective significance.

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