

LINGUISTIC AND PRAGMATIC POTENTIAL OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTAL INTERNET MEMES

The study deals with English-language Internet memes which communicate environmental issues. The material for the study was taken from Reddit, which is used to share topical memes on the Internet. The study analyses the linguistic and pragmatic potential of English-language environmental Internet memes and describes their visual pattern and verbal component. It is shown that after reframing, the visual template of viral Internet memes becomes a means of attracting attention to environmental issues. While keeping the same visual template, new lines, captions, and headings referring to environmental issues can be added to the verbal template; in some cases, environmental Internet memes are created specifically to explain the negative consequences of human economic activity or to evaluate environmental stunts. The author determines the set of relevant strategies and tactics based on the linguopragmatic model, characterizes the verbal and non-verbal means ensuring their implementation. It is found that dominant strategies are the strategies of drawing attention to environmental issues, informing; argumentation; intimidation; creating a comical effect; development of a stereotype of environmental behaviour, which are implemented by tactics of focusing attention, reducing the situation to an absurdity, and negative prediction. Considering the identified communicative strategies, the typology of environmental Internet memes is proposed, and five main linguopragmatic types are identified: informing, persuasive, intimidating, humorous, ironic-sceptical. The relevant linguistic means to implement communicative tactics in English-language environmental Internet memes are colloquial vocabulary, idioms, professional vocabulary (environmental terms), synonyms, antonyms, metaphors, imperatives, present participle, colloquial syntactic constructions, expressive syntactic means: antithesis, question-answer constructions, anaphora, epiphora, and ellipsis.

Keywords: online communication, environmental communication, environmental Internet memes, linguopragmatic potential, communicative strategies, tactics, English.

Е. Б. Павлова

ЛИНГВОПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНЫХ ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ИНТЕРНЕТ-МЕМОВ

Объектом исследования являются англоязычные интернет-мемы, транслирующие экологическую проблематику. Источником материала послужил сайт Reddit.com, который используется для распространения

актуальных мемов в сети интернет. В статье анализируется лингвопрагматический потенциал англоязычных экологических интернет-мемов, описывается их визуальный шаблон и вербальный компонент. Показано, что в результате рефрейминга визуальный шаблон вирусных интернет-мемов становится средством привлечения внимания к экологической проблематике. При сохранении визуального ряда в вербальный шаблон могут добавляться новые реплики, подписи-заголовки, отсылающие к экологической проблематике; в ряде случаев экологические интернет-мемы создаются специально для разъяснения негативных последствий хозяйственной деятельности человека или оценки экологических акций. Автором на основе лингвопрагматической модели определяется набор релевантных стратегий и тактик, характеризуются обеспечивающие их реализацию вербальные и невербальные средства. Установлено, что доминирующими являются стратегии привлечения внимания к вопросам экологии, информирования; аргументирования; запугивания; создания комического эффекта; выработки стереотипа экологичного поведения. Названные коммуникативные стратегии реализуются тактиками акцентирования внимания, негативного прогнозирования, доведения ситуации до абсурда. С учетом выделенных коммуникативных стратегий в работе предложена типология экологических интернет-мемов, выделено пять основных лингвопрагматических типов: информирующий, убеждающий, запугивающий, юмористический, иронически-скептический. Релевантными языковыми средствами реализации коммуникативных тактик в англоязычных экологических интернет-мемов является разговорная лексика, идиомы, специальная лексика (экологическая терминология), синонимы, антонимы, метафоры, приемы языковой игры, императивы, причастия настоящего времени, разговорные синтаксические конструкции, средства экспрессивного синтаксиса: антитеза, вопросно-ответные конструкции, анафора, эпифора, эллипсис.

Ключевые слова: виртуальная коммуникация, экологическая коммуникация, экологические интернет-мемы, лингвопрагматический потенциал, коммуникативные стратегии, тактики, английский язык.

Introduction

Environmental communication as an independent phenomenon has been the subject of linguistic study since the mid-1980s [Littlejohn, Foss, 2009]. According to A. J. Flor, environmental communication is a set of communication strategies and methods regulating the rational use of natural resources and compliance with environmental protection [Flor, 2004]. M. Meisner interprets environmental communication as a process of information exchange on environmental issues [Meisner, 2015]. In addition to the communicative function, R. J. Cox considers environmental communication as having pragmatic and constitutive

functions. According to him, the essence of the pragmatic function of environmental communication consists in education, prevention, persuasion, and cooperation during environmental activities. The constitutive function helps to shape environmental public awareness, it aims to introduce the systems of environmental values, ideologies, and views into the minds of people through communication [Cox, 2010]. The spread of the Internet has significantly expanded the sphere of environmental communication. The emergence of social networks has given rise to various formats of environmental online communication. Memes with great pragmatic potential have become one of such booming formats [Izgarsheva, 2020; Kanashina, 2018; Kvyat, 2015; Rebrina, Shamne, 2022; Ross, Rivers, 2019; Shchurina, 2012; Shifman, 2013; Veshnyakova, 2016; Zhang, Jichang, Ke, 2016; Zhang, Pinto 2021]. Environmental Internet memes are particularly active in English-language online communication; they instantly go viral and penetrate the national environmental online communication of other countries. This explains the relevance of studying the linguopragmatics of English-language Internet memes on environmental topics.

Methods and material

While communicating socially significant ideas, environmental Internet memes have a complex pragmatic component. The purpose of the study is to determine the stratagem and tactical organization of English-language environmental Internet memes which ensures their pragmatic potential. To achieve the purpose, the following steps were taken: to identify the dominant communicative strategies and the tactics which represent them and receive verbal and nonverbal objectification in texts of environmental Internet memes; to establish relevant linguistic means and characterize a nonverbal component (visual pattern) of the meme; to differentiate main types of environmental Internet memes depending on the identified communicative strategies.

The website Reddit.com (reddit.com: search results by environmental memes) was the source for material collection, which is used to share current memes on the Internet. Reddit.com being a hybrid of a website and a social network allows you to upload your own videos and links to third-party sites, provides keyword search, and has standard social network tools. In fact, Reddit.com is a new media platform to organize, package and share environmental content [Simon, Xenos, 2000], and the phenomenon of the Internet meme turns into a significant factor influencing a new environmental media landscape [Ross, Rivers, 2019].

The selected Internet memes were analysed using linguostylistic and linguosemiotic methods, and content analysis. The linguopragmatics of English-language Internet memes is based on the previously developed linguopragmatic model of environmental online discourse which includes the following components: goal → intention/communicative-pragmatic attitudes → strategy → tactics [Pavlova, 2021].

The influential potential of English-language environmental Internet memes was also considered in the light of the typology proposed by N. A. Zinovieva. This typology is based on the principle of dichotomies: “the source of the meme (truth-lie dichotomy); the object of reality which needs to be reflected (character-evidence/idea dichotomy); appeal to the level of cultural involvement (tradition-innovation dichotomy); semantic dominants (background-figure dichotomy); the form of representation (image-text dichotomy); the effect (thought-action dichotomy)” [Zinovieva, 2015].

Results

Internet memes can respond quickly to current events, have a strong emotional impact on the addressee, reach a wide audience of Internet users, actively communicate environmental views online and offline, and satisfy the audience’s need for entertainment and creativity. Environmental Internet memes offer a timely understanding of environmental issues through the prism of politics, economics, and human psychology. They serve to form a topical agenda (reflect reactions to the latest eco-events, actions of eco-activists) and problematization of reality fragments (true memes and specially created or false memes); Internet memes are used to focus the audience’s attention on the problems of climate change, plastic pollution of the oceans, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, etc., protest against hypocritical actions of large corporations, government agencies, pseudo eco-activists, mock the actions of eco-activists and obtrusive and useless eco-propaganda (self-generated or true memes) or discredit the actions of corporations and states hiding behind concerns for the environment (false memes); promote environmental consciousness and stereotypes of eco-friendly behaviour (false and true memes).

Based on the linguostylistic, linguosemiotic, and content analysis of environmental Internet memes, the following specification of the linguopragmatic model for this segment of environmental online communication can be proposed.

Purpose (whyspeak?) — to support and promote environmental ideas / demonstrate a sceptical attitude to environmental actions → Intention

(what is one's intention to speak?) — to influence the addressee / communicative and pragmatic attitudes: to influence the addressee (how?) with informative and emphasizing (to inform about the problem, draw attention to it, support the idea of sustainable production, make think about the scale of environmental problems), persuasive (to prove the need to protect nature and the danger of the consequences of environmental disasters); recreational (to entertain the audience, mock the futility of the actions taken); regulatory (to reinforce the desired stereotype of behaviour) attitudes → strategy (by what speech acts?) — to draw attention to environmental issues, inform, give reasons, intimidate, create a comical effect, develop a stereotype of environmental behaviour → tactics (what means?) — verbal, non-verbal.

Below is a true meme-innovation which visual template was made up of footage from the movie *Star Wars: Episode 2 — Attack of the Clones* (2002, USA) (Fig. 1). The meme with the original title *For the better, right?* appeared on Twitter in 2021, then it was posted on Reddit where it went viral. As a result of changing the situational framework, the entertaining picture has become a template for generating new meanings including drawing attention to the environmental problem of climate change. While retaining the same image, new remarks were added to the verbal template, and there appeared a caption referring to environmental issues *After climate summit*, as well as a generalized name for a collective actor *World leaders* whose face is Anakin, the movie character with hidden evil inten-



Fig. 1. The *For the better, right?* meme

tions. In the analysed meme, the intention of influencing the addressee is objectified to encourage them to think about urgent global environmental problems. The meaningful look of Anakin Skywalker, his silence, as well as the changed face of his interlocutor Padme Amidala create a feeling of anxiety. As a result, based on a well-known visual template, a new verbal component, a new centrepiece of the Internet meme and a new generalized meaning have been formed to draw attention to the problem of reducing emissions into the atmosphere and ironically emphasize the lack of real action from world leaders. The use of images of famous characters against a green landscape creates a contrast between the verbal and non-verbal elements and implements the tactic of focusing the attention of the Internet audience on the problem at hand. The verbal component, apart from the title, contains one statement *We promise to reduce emissions* and a duplicate question *You will actually do it, right?* which has different intonation and is nonverbally objectified by the facial expressions of the character Padme Amidala.

- In general, this meme is an example of the implementation of the strategy to draw attention to global climate problems.
- The following Internet meme, which uses the well-known visual template *Drakeposting*, objectifies the intention to influence the addressee to endorse ecological ideas and specific environmentally friendly methods of economic activity (Fig. 2.)



Fig. 2. The Drakeposting meme

The original visual template of the meme *Drakeposting*, based on still images from the Drake music video, is not modified. The footage shows Drake in a bright orange jacket first spectacularly refusing something and then showing an approving gesture. After reframing, the verbal component of the meme which clarifies what Drake does not support (traditional farming methods) and what he supports (regenerative farming) has been transformed. In this example, the strategy of informing is implemented by means of the tactic of focusing attention. As a result, a new centrepiece of the Internet meme has been formed including a well-known visual template, a new verbal component, and a new generalized meaning — to support the idea of sustainable production. According to the typology proposed by N. A. Zinovyeva, this Internet meme is a true meme, it represents a meme-innovation since it uses a precedent phenomenon — an existing topical meme. The image of a recognizable meme character enhances the pragmatic effect of the creolized text and triggers the audience to share the views expressed in it. The tactic of focusing attention is realized through the contrast between the verbal (standard and special vocabulary) and non-verbal (the image of a famous rapper) means. Verbal and non-verbal elements complement each other — elliptical syntactic constructions (*Supporting destructive “traditional” farming practices / Supporting regenerative farming practices*) provide a concise caption and the visual component of the meme allows to understand its meaning more precisely.

Next, let us consider an Internet meme which implements the intention to influence the addressee through the strategy of argumentation. The *Which of these is true about climate change* meme shown in Fig. 3 is a



Fig. 3. The Which of these is true about climate change meme

false meme created specifically to explain the truth about climate change. It looks like a comic strip and makes an emotional appeal for practical actions aimed at preventing negative consequences of global warming. The verbal component contains several argumentation techniques: the meme begins with a rhetorical question *Which of these is true about climate change?* attracting the attention of the addressee and encouraging him to reflect on the problem posed. Other expressive syntactic means are also used in the text part of the meme: antithesis, question-answer constructions, syntactic parallelism (anaphora and epiphora). The meme ends with a call to action.

In this meme, visual elements illustrate and support verbal elements. Contrasting colours mark the climate pessimists in purple and the optimists in yellow; the appeal phrase is placed on a red background.

The following are typical examples of Internet memes which objectify the intention to influence the addressee through the strategy of intimidation implemented by the tactics of negative prediction.

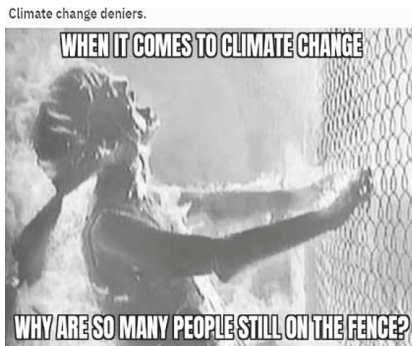


Fig. 4. The Sarah Connor is on fire meme



Fig. 5. The Cat in the Hat meme

Visual templates of the memes are footage from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, USA) (Fig. 4) and *The Cat in the Hat* (2003, USA) (Fig. 5); these templates are not modified. The centrepiece of these memes constitutes a new generalized meaning (climate change is disastrous for humanity) and a stable visual template. These memes are true, refer to well-known contemporary feature films and their conceptual dominant is thought. The memes explain the same thing — devastating effects of climate change. The pragmatic potential of the meme *Sarah Connor is on fire* is provided primarily by the apocalyptic image and is addressed to the so-called climate sceptics as the caption *Climate change deniers* at the top of the meme goes. The verbal component of the meme contains a rhetorical question encouraging the addressee (climate sceptics) to think about the negative consequences of global climate change and the need for concrete actions to prevent the disaster: *When it comes to climate change why are so many people still on the fence?* The use of the idiom *on the fence* adds to the expressivity of the statement. The pragmatic effect of the meme *The Cat in the Hat* is created mainly by the emphasis on the verbal component which consists of two statements: *A bright future for younger generations; Climate change and its effects likely causing mass extinction.* The first part of the statement contains irony created by using the metaphor *a bright future*. The tactic of negative prediction is also objectified by the term *mass extinction*. In general, the verbal element overwhelms the visual element.

As part of the strategy to create a comical effect, tactics to mock ecologists' stunts, activities of large corporations and states, and the discrepancy between their statements and actions are implemented. The true meme *Environmental activists* (Fig. 6) has an original visual template based on a screenshot from the video game *Cuphead* (2017). This template



Fig. 6. The Environment activists meme



Fig. 7. The Just Stop Oil meme



Fig. 8. The Captain Planet and the Planeteers meme

is not modified. After reframing, the following caption was added: *Environmental activists talking about climate change; Them using Yachts and airplanes.* The comical effect of the meme is created by the resonance of the verbal and nonverbal (illustrative) components.

The strategy of creating a comical effect is realized in this case by the tactic to reduce the situation to an absurdity. The false meme *Just Stop Oil* (Fig. 7) contains an immediate emotional response to the recent stunt by the protesters of environmental activist group *Just Stop Oil* who threw tomato soup over Vincent van Gogh's painting *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London. The meme template consists of four images,



Fig. 9.1. The expanding brain meme

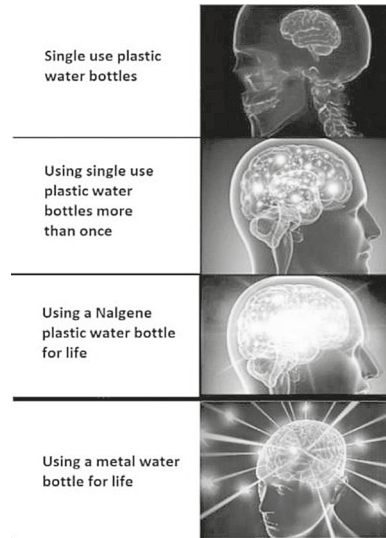


Fig. 9.2. The expanding brain meme

each with captions. The sequence of the meme's images and their accompanying lines ironically represent the absurd situation which shows how *Soup on Van Gogh* stops oil production and saves the world from a climate collapse.

The strategy of developing a stereotype of eco-friendly behaviour and promoting environmental consciousness is realized in the following memes. Figure 8 shows a meme which visual template is footage from animated environmentalist superhero television series *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* about superheroes who save the Earth from an environmental disaster. This meme can be characterized as a false meme with an explicit pragmatic motivational message — a call not to litter. The creolized text of the meme objectifies the regulatory attitude which is expressed in the desire to reinforce the necessary stereotype of eco-friendly behaviour. The text part of the meme uses colloquial vocabulary, the imperative, colloquial syntactic constructions; the negative particle *not* is highlighted in capital letters and italics.

Let us consider two versions of the viral true meme-innovation which has the conventional name *Expanding brain meme* (Fig. 9.1.; Fig. 9.2). After reframing, the meme entered environmental communication; it implements the strategy of promoting ecological consciousness and developing a stereotype of eco-friendly behavior. It is known that this meme appeared on Reddit in January 2017. It usually uses a sequence of three or four im-

ages, but the last image always depicts a large brain with beams radiating out of it or a fully glowing person. The verbal or non-verbal signs to the left of the expanding brain ideally show progression of ideas (from supposedly primitive to more advanced) but can also be an ironic way to emphasize the absurdity of each following idea.

The Internet meme templates presented in Figures 9.1 and 9.2 are not modified. The centerpiece of the analyzed Internet memes constitutes a new generalized meaning (the importance of highlighting environmental problems in a meme format and the need to use reusable cups to reduce plastic pollution) and a set visual pattern. The sequence of verbal signs in the left part of the meme does not allow us clearly to answer the question of how serious the pragmatic message of the creolized text is, which is a sign of the so-called post-ironic meme.

Conclusion

The study of English-language environmental Internet memes has revealed the following dominant strategies: to attract attention to environmental issues, to inform, to give reasons, to intimidate, and to create a comical effect. The strategies of attracting attention to environmental issues, informing and arguing are implemented primarily through specially selected facts and appeals to ethical and emotional arguments, elements of resonance of verbal and non-verbal elements; the strategy of intimidation is objectified as a rule by emotional reasons containing an element of threat, negative prediction; the strategy of creating a comical effect is implemented by elements of language game, resonance / dissonance of the background, object, character, verbal and non-verbal elements and sometimes reduce the situation to an absurdity. As a rule, as a visual component, widely known images-templates, images of recognizable meme-characters, footage from famous films, cartoons, video games are used and actively involved in reframing related to environmental issues. Based on the analysis of the stratagem and tactical organization of creolized Internet memes, five main linguopragmatic types were differentiated: informing, persuasive, intimidating, humorous, ironical and sceptical. Due to their flexible pragmatic potential, environmental Internet memes are becoming a popular genre of English-language environmental discourse, which is a product of both new online humorous culture and mobilizing environmental PR-technologies.

The present study examined the English-language environmental internet memes posted on Reddit. We propose that future researchers turn to other Internet resources (social networks) for more extensive results.

In addition, environmental Internet memes can be studied in other languages, which would allow a comparative analysis for the diversity of coverage of the phenomenon under study. Despite its limitations, the current study has contributed to the literature and research on English-language environmental Internet memes. The obtained results of the study of linguo-pragmatics of English-language environmental Internet memes provide an opportunity to outline the contour of the development of this phenomenon and provide additional material for the analysis of global environmental Internet communication.

References

- Cox, R. J. (2010). *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc.
- Flor, A. G. (2004). *Environmental Communication: Principles, Approaches, Strategies of Communication Applied to Environmental Management*. Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, Open University.
- Izgarsheva, A. V. (2020). The internet meme as media text: linguistic aspect. *Bulletin of the Moscow Region State University. Series: Linguistics*, 5: 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.18384/2310-712X-2020-5-86-101> (In Russian)
- Kanashina, S. V. (2018). Internet meme and precedent phenomenon. *Tomsk State Pedagogical University Bulletin*, 4 (193): 122–127. <https://doi.org/10.23951/1609-624X-2018-4-122-127> (In Russian)
- Kvyat, A. G. (2013). Media Meme as a Tool of Political PR: a Cognitive Approach. *Mediascope*, 1. Available at: <http://www.mediascope.ru/en/node/1254> (accessed: 16.07.2022). (In Russian)
- Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A. (2009). *Encyclopaedia of Communication Theory*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Meisner, M. (2015). Environmental Communication: What it is and Why it Matters. *Mark Meisner*. Available at: <https://meisner.ca/2015/11/30/environmental-communication-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> (accessed: 26.09.2022).
- Pavlova, E. B. (2021). *Linguopragmatics of environmental online discourse*. Moscow: Peoples' Friendship University of Russia Press. (In Russian)
- Rebrina, L. N., Shamne, N. L. (2022). Internet memes as a relevant format of political communication in Germany (the case of the thematic group “Olaf Scholz”). *Science Journal of Volgograd State University. Linguistics*, 21 (4): 38–58. <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2022.4.3> (In Russian)
- Ross, A. S., Rivers, D. J. (2019). Internet Memes, Media Frames, and the Conflicting Logics of Climate Change Discourse. *Environmental Communication*, 13 (7): 975–994. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2018.1560347>
- Shchurina, Yu. V. (2012). Internet meme as a phenomenon of Internet communication. *Nauchnyi dialog*, 3: 161–173. (In Russian)
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Simon, A., Xenos, M. (2000). Media Framing and Effective Public Deliberation. *Political Communication*, 17 (4): 363–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600050178979>
- Veshnyakova, A. V. (2016). Linguocultural aspect of Internet memes. *Actual problems of humanities and natural sciences*, 6 (4): 34–40. (In Russian)
- Zhang, L., Jichang, Z., Ke, X. (2016). Who creates Trends in Online Social Media: The Crowd or Opinion Leaders? *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 21 (1): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12145>
- Zhang, B., Pinto, J. (2021). Changing the World One Meme at a Time: The Effects of Climate Change Memes on Civic Engagement Intentions. *Environmental Communication*, 15 (6): 749–764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2021.1894197>
- Zinovyeva, N. A. (2015). The impact of memes on internet users: typology of internet memes. *The Review of Economy, the Law and Sociology*, 1: 195–201. (In Russian)