

Reactivation of Internet Memes of the Military Era: Psycholinguistic Markers

Реактивація інтернет-мемів мілітарного часу: психолінгвістичні маркери

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ABSTRACT

Purpose. *The purpose of the article is to clarify the communicative possibilities and stylistic functions of Internet memes as verbalized representatives of the military period (2022–...) and carriers “collaborative memory” (Conte, Padulo & Fairfield, 2024)*

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in virtual communication, which is based on socio- and psycholinguistic dimensions. The dynamics of functioning of the memes in the information space of Ukraine is explained, according to the authors, by the rapid development of this media genre, an instant associative reflection on the current events of the present, and the precedence of the expression that is embedded in an Internet meme.

Research methods. *To objectify the research results, we used the method of media monitoring, which helped to analyze the media space of Ukraine in order to identify the dominant internet memes of the military era; sociological respondent-analysis, which helped to understand the decoding of modern Internet memes and the definition of associative series that accompany the use of Internet memes in communication; a method of stylistic analysis that helped to analyze the techniques by which Internet memes are created / replicated in the media; elements of the cognitive method for the analysis of collaborative memory (Rajaram & Pereira-Pasarin, 2010) in the perception of Internet memes.*

Results. *We interviewed more than 100 respondents – mostly young people who spread (and sometimes create) internet memes themselves. The vast majority of modern war memes were created on the contrast “own / foreign”, which is most understood by the recipients. More than 70.0% of the respondents understand Internet memes and it is not difficult for them to decode them. Therefore, the associations caused by the Internet memes we proposed were only positive and had a humorous connotation, despite the complex psychological situation with the war.*

Conclusions. *Internet memes of the military era became a verbalized markers of the “collaborative memory” of Ukrainians during the war. And, therefore, became a verbalized marker of Ukrainians during the war. And this allows us to state that humor in the form of Internet memes can be both a protective reaction of Ukrainians to the events of the war, and a new cultural fund that reflects modern social realities.*

Key words: *internet meme, war meme, humour, Ukrainian media, media linguistics, Stylistic resource in Internet, collaborative memory, cognitive research.*

Introduction

From February 24, 2022, the Internet space of Ukraine was flooded with news about the beginning of a full-scale war. News, mainly of an extraordinary (hot) nature, became dominant in the information space of Ukraine. Instead, the liberation of the territory of the Kyiv region and the retreat of the enemy from the outskirts of Kyiv changed the pessimistic mood of Ukrainians. Since then, the media content has started to weaken a little: the serious message of the news began to change to a light mode, entertaining content started to appear, and in some places even humorous content (especially on the

Internet). Basically, this happens against the background of the contrast between “heroization of Ukrainians” vs “deheroization (discrediting) of the enemy”. It is this contrast, in our opinion, that formed the basis of the creation of modern memes that have captured the Ukrainian Internet space since the beginning of the full-scale war.

The impetus for writing our article was, on the one hand, the growing number of research on memes and, on the other hand,

“their fleeting nature not only underscores their importance in digital culture but also poses an obstacle to carry out research on them” (Castañar, 2023: 525).

It was previously proven that “sharing memes most frequently with close friends and family members” (Miltner, 2014); memes are part of interpersonal communication, in particular

“sharing of memes plays a meaningful role in many close relationships, and that the role of memes in relationships is partially a function of humor orientation of the individual and humor-related goals of the meme sharing” (Brody & Cullen, 2023);

and also memes – bright intertexts of modernity that freely migrate from language to language, having no “cultural borders” (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017), etc. Existing and interesting works on the analysis of political memes (Rakityanskaya, 2023; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020, etc.), instead, we have the research limitation of the analysis of internet war memes. We assume that this is related to the acuteness of the topic, or political motivation, or even psychological reasons. We will try to understand this and show what memes are imprinted in the memory of recipients in wartime, why some memes instantly disappear as well as appear, for what purpose communicators exchange war memes and whether it is true that memes as humorous polycode units become a defensive reaction of Ukrainians to the difficult events of the war.

Internet memes due to their ability to instantly rebroadcast real-life events are frequent for analysis by linguists / culturologists / sociologists (Sizova et al., 2024; Kuznetsova & Podolian, 2023; Wiggins, 2019; Tehlivets, 2022; Milosavljević, 2020; Dafaure, 2020; Semotiuk, 2023, etc.); we have already carried out the search for phraseological memes and the analysis of their functions in media

communication in our publications (Syzonov 2023); the role of humor during the war was also analyzed by individual scientists (Dragan-Ivanets, 2017; Yehorova et al., 2023; Brody & Cullen, 2023). Separate scientific articles are devoted to the psychoanalytic analysis of Internet memes, especially in the context of modern mass communication (Leiser, 2022). The study of the communication of the military era in psychology is also an important object of analysis: see works in the field of *military psychology* (Betancourt et al., 2020; Çakıroğlu et al., 2021; Zasiékina et al., 2023, etc.).

However, clarifying the stylistic possibilities of Internet memes during the war, supported by sociological respondent-analysis, was not yet a separate study. In addition, our article defines the functional and stylistic parameters of Internet memes, which are the so-called the “humour shield” of Ukrainians during the war (they are often created / spread by the communicators themselves, and therefore we decided to study this tendency as well).

In the proposed research, we singled out in our opinion, the most iconic memes that encoded important historical events and messages for future generations of Ukrainians, recreated the state-building national mythology, or became a “means of new folklore” (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017: 27) for the consolidation of all generations of Ukrainians during the acute, large-scale phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war. To prove this, we selected about >100 military memes and tried to decode them with the help of recipients. Did they try to guess the memes correctly, were they able to reproduce their context, was their answer influenced by background knowledge, and did the memes make them laugh? Answers to these questions also formed the basis of our research.

The tasks of the article are: (i) to prove that an Internet meme is a verbalized reflection on the dynamic psychological development of events, (ii) to analyze Internet memes of war as precedent polycode units, (iii) to substantiate that an Internet meme is a “light” symbolic view of complex situation related to the war, (iv) to characterize the functional nature of Internet memes of war and to determine the dominant stylistic techniques that achieve the manipulative-humorous effect of using Internet memes in the information space of Ukraine.

Research methods

Military Internet memes were selected on the platform “Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online”: >100 Internet memes and their modifications – bright verbal illustrators of modern realities. To analyze respondents’ reactions to war memes, we used a sociological method using “*random waves*”, which was tested earlier (Noor, Tajik & Golzar, 2022). The criterion “*to understand / not to understand*” is defined as mandatory for the implementation of an associative series when decoding Internet memes of war. It is important that for each questionnaire we added a *rating scale*: to what extent I understand / do not understand this meme (rate from 0 to 5, where 0 is completely not understood and 5 is completely understood). This will allow you to see how well the meme worked for the recipient and whether, for example, words / phrases / stylistic tropes and figures / symbols, etc. helped in this case.

A number of memes on various topics during this war were selected for an analysis: (i) heroes and “anti-heroes”; (ii) weapons; (iii) volunteering; (iv) neologisms and neophraseology; (v) location memes; (vi) reflection of world politics on the war in Ukraine. Therefore, 5–6 memes of each group and more than 20 additional memes that arose in different waves of the survey as a reflection on current events were selected (this was influenced most by background knowledge). TOP-100 memes analyzed in three groups of respondents of 30–35 people in three waves – March-April 2022, September 2022, May-June 2023. Therefore, the total number of respondents is 100 people (Kyivans who went down to the bomb shelters at the “Arsenalna” and “Zoloti vorota” metro stations). We decided to apply the previously tested *cognitive method* for the analysis of collaborative memory (Rajaram & Pereira-Pasarin, 2010) to Internet memes.

Therefore, to objectify the research results, we used the method of *media monitoring*, which helped to analyze the media space of Ukraine in order to identify the dominant internet memes of the military era; *sociological respondent-analysis*, which helped to understand the decoding of modern Internet memes and the definition of associative series that accompany the use of Internet memes in communication; *a method of stylistic analysis* that helped to analyze the techniques by which Internet memes are created / replicated in the media.

Results & Discussion

The well-known Ukrainian foundation “*Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online*” collects key memes arising during the war. And so we can talk about a whole cultural and artistic layer of memes, with the help of which we reproduce the war in symbols, phrases, codes, pictures (Rakityanskaya, 2023). Thus, it is about the formation of war memes, and even more so – the formation of militarized humor (Yehorova et al., 2023), which may seem paradoxical at first glance. As is well known, memes can spread as “viruses” through different channels and with the help of different communicators (Brodie, 2009), but the dynamics of war do not allow, it would seem, to do this actively. But in reality it is not so. The example of Ukrainian Internet communication shows that creativity prevails over psychological oppression (even in times of war). Ukrainians try to muffle their pain with humor. Memes are best suited as a complex of texts, which is a feature of the Digital Age (Shifman, 2014), in fact, it is its main characteristic, which best shows the witty response of communicators to topical issues, sometimes morally complex.

As you know, in the modern scientific space there is even a concept of “aesthetics of war”, which has been established in European communication since the middle of the last century as a way of crisis dialogue between generations; and is currently developing in various types of communication – primarily mass (Mitton, 2020). In our opinion, it is war that can generate anti-crisis communications, to which the category “*Internet war meme*” / “*Internet meme of the military era*” can be attributed. We interpret this concept as a multicode unit of information about the war, which can be transmitted to other communicators by mimicry or copying, imitation, as well as by means of various means of media creolization. War memes were not well known and tested on the European continent, because Europe fortunately had not experienced active hostilities since the Second World War. Instead, researchers from China, Africa, and Asia touched on these problems (Christopher, 2008; Wiggins, 2019; Liang, 2020; Dafaure, 2020, etc.) – they are talking about memes as a means of security, anti-crisis, etc. types of communication. The Russian-Ukrainian war thus became an impetus for the generation of Internet memes created during the war

(and not after it), and its main characters are formed on the opposition “own / foreign”. Such a contrast, in our opinion, creates a humorous effect at the basis of internet war memes.

War memes play several functions in tandem with the Internet: (i) they act as a means of communication, because like language, in wartime culture people often replace verbal utterances with syncretic communication tools, namely memes as effective symbols of war; (ii) satisfying the need of network users for emotional and expressive, creative expression of thoughts, individual and collective presentation of perception of current events, in particular war; (iii) at the global level, memes can be used to succinctly share one's attitude to the leading positions and opinions of society, which is especially evident in crisis communication. Therefore, we believe that the digitization process, which is dominant today (Shifman, 2014; Sujon & Dyer, 2020), actively affects the process of creating and replicating memes – different in origin, graphics, meanings, but the same in purpose – to simulate a communicative situation and reproduce it in new realities. From February 24, 2022, war is such a reality for Ukrainians.

War memes, according to our observations, are characterized by a set of proven features:

(1) a meme can be *any unit of information*: a catchy word, expression, picture or other verbal / non-verbal sign;

(2) memes appear *spontaneously*, because they often become elements of both political and media technologies for different purposes);

(3) the form of the meme is fixed, but at the same time *flexible to modifications* in order to interpret various events and phenomena;

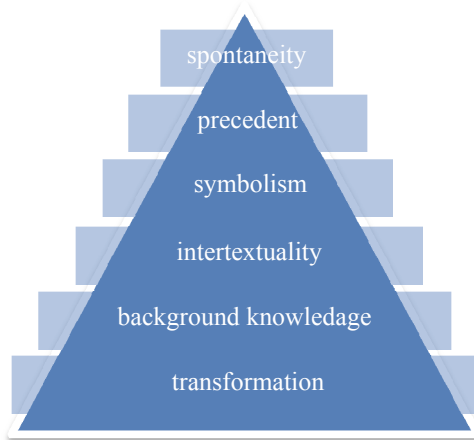
(4) the meme always appeals to *the necessary background knowledge*, and therefore the recipient has orientation in the precedent of the situation;

(5) a meme *is subject to evolution*: over time, coming to the attention of different Internet users, it is modified, a new experience is superimposed on the template of individual memes;

(6) memes *reproduce cultural memory* and respond to the digitalized challenges of modernity.

So we have several characteristics (Figure 1), like a “snowball”, that make a meme “successful”. These characteristics can extend the “life” of a meme and spawn its clones or modifications.

Figure 1
Interdependent characteristics of internet memes



1.1. Dominant functions of war memes

We believe that war memes also fall under the laws of this “pyramid” of interdependent meme characteristics (Figure 1). In our opinion, it is precisely these characteristics that allow us to talk about the dominant functions of war memes. First of all, this –

(A) *entertainment function* (as a rule, this function helps to defuse the information background, which is heavy during wartime). It is natural when memes are used in spoken media communication, but it is strange when the entertaining nature of memes is followed on the official channels of Ukraine in connection with the full-scale Russian invasion (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Internet memes about the war on the official Twitter (X) accounts of Ukraine (@Ukraine, @APUkraine)



It is the contrast in the form of officialdom and used memes that achieve the effect of unpredictability and contrast. Humor is achieved through allusions used in war memes: (a) Ukraine's geopolitics towards Russia; (b) Wagner's trip to Moscow; (c) provision of "Leopard" to Ukraine. By the way, the language of memes also plays an important role. For example, the last illustration (c) indicates a German context related to the provision of German-made weapons (Figure 2).

In times of socio-political transformations and military upheavals, it is memes that can play the role of "cultural codes" of memory:

"memes in social movements can serve as individuals' collective mouthpiece and, furthermore, influence the way a movement is taken up by political actors and news media, playing to both collective and individual dynamics" (Leiser 2022: 238).

Official insiders of the state were also involved in memes, which also indicates the blurring of the boundaries between official power and society. For example, the heroes of memes were V. Zelenskyi, V. Zaluzhnyi, and even world-class politicians – B. Johnson, E. Macron (Figure 3).

Figure 3

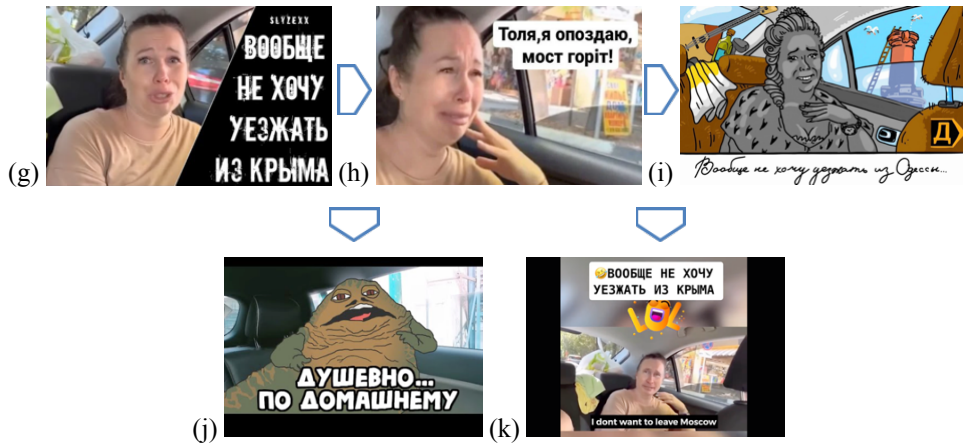
Internet war memes about officials



(B) Based on the fact that "internet memes and virals are passed from person to person" (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017: 32), the next

function of war memes is *a communicative function*. This function, in our opinion, allows us to show how an Internet meme can be modified when the “heroes” remain, but the information content of the meme changes (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Internet meme transformation



The interdependence of memes is related to the central image – a woman (Figure 4), who did not want to leave the occupied city of Alushta (Crimea), emphasizing that it is "very soulful" here, but shelling began (g → h). The transformation of the image was manifested in the visualization of Catherine, whose monument was demolished in Odessa (i), and in the monsters who do not want to leave Crimea (j), and in the image of Putin, against whose political regime Ukrainians are fighting (k).

By the way, this same function helps to use memes in conflict situations, “memes facilitated conversation between diverse positions” (Milner, 2013: 2357). And in a war situation, we assume that there can be many verbal conflicts, and therefore the communicative function of memes allows you to reduce tension in communication, in particular, virtual communication.

(C) like any media product, a meme can also influence communicators. *A manipulative function* is associated with this, which is especially evident in war memes. The history, for example, of the “Cotton” meme is connected with the de-semanticization

of the Ukrainian lexeme cotton (Russian: хлопок) – cotton fiber from which yarn is made; threads of this fiber. Consonance with the homonyms *хлопок* (Ukrainian *cotton*) / *хлопОк* (Ukrainian explosion) and gave rise to a number of manipulative memes (Figure 5).

Figure 5

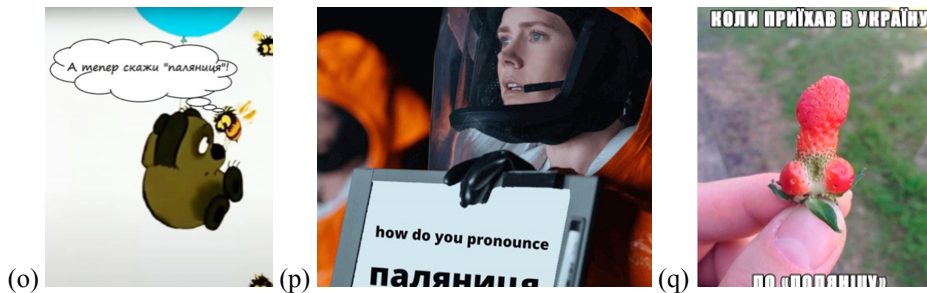
Representation of the manipulative function of war memes (on the example of the lexeme COTTON = БАВОВНА)



The same can be said about password words such as *palyanitsya*, *ukrzaliznytsia*, *strawberry*, etc., which also became the heroes of war memes (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Watchwords of war in memes



The humorous effect of such memes (Figure 6) is connected with the word that became the password of Ukrainians in this war. Due to the fact that Russians cannot pronounce some words, it became an occasion to make fun of them in memes (o) (p); as well as the incorrectness of the translation of certain words (q) into Ukrainian by Russians (*PalYanytsia* = *ПалЯниця* was confused with *PolUnytsia* = *ПолУниця*, which is why certain memes arose on this topic). Increasingly, Ukrainians are beginning to use memes of the military era for entertainment, which

is confirmed by previous studies: “use humor to criticize, mock, and expose political events, issues, and persons” (Leiser, 2022: 240); “even if meme theory never catches on it encourages us to think about war more creatively” (Christopher, 2008: 903). Such language units are the identifier of “collaborative memory” (Conte, Padulo & Fairfield, 2024).

It is interesting that memes can become international communication units, which is their universality. For example, the *Bavovna* meme became widespread in the English-speaking segment of the Internet as part of a humanitarian campaign to support Ukraine in the war (*#bavovna*). In addition, the musical community, as a sign of creative support for the military of Ukraine and all Ukrainians, created a song based on the meme about cotton, which can be considered an example of the expansion of the meme's functioning system.

We emphasize that the specified functions are dominant and do not exhaust all the possibilities of memes in the media space.

1.2. Decoding Internet Memes of War

War memes, like any other memes, are characterized by dynamism and rapid word-of-mouth transmission. This actually explains one of the leading characteristics of memes today – spontaneity, as well as their spread to the masses – precedent (Shifman, 2014; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015; Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Castañar, 2023). At the same time, it is the fleeting nature of memes in virtual communication that is an obstacle to the quick fixation of memes in cultural memory:

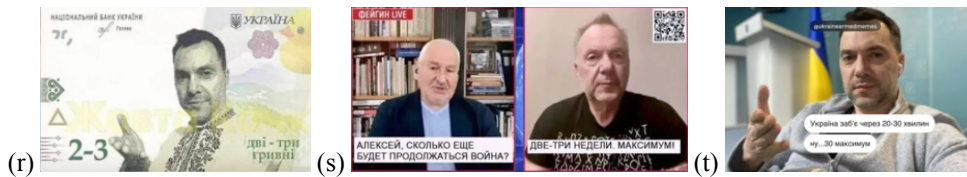
“Memes are often viewed as organic ideas because they undergo a process of variation, competition, selection and retention. <...>. Memes transform from a single event to a shared social phenomenon through the processes of imitation, copying, mimicking, remixing or repackaging. The competition and selection processes distinguish successful memes from those that become extinct. Recently, the role of the Internet and social media has been particularly vital to the dramatic rise of online memes” (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015: 289).

The biggest challenge facing current recipients is decoding memes in the flow of information. Often just understanding the meme without additional words is the key to the long life of memes. For example, in March 2022, one of the insiders in the media space was O. Arestovych,

the speaker of the Office of the President. His famous phrase about the end of the war “in 2–3 weeks” instantly became popular among Ukrainians. As a result, the image of O. Arestovych (Figure 7) became a precedent in war memes (see the image of Arestovych on the non-existent 2–3 hryvnia banknote (r), in political and football forecasts (s, t), where Arestovych appears as the main “expert”).

Figure 7

‘2–3 weeks’ (Arestovych’s war end forecast) – meme illustrations



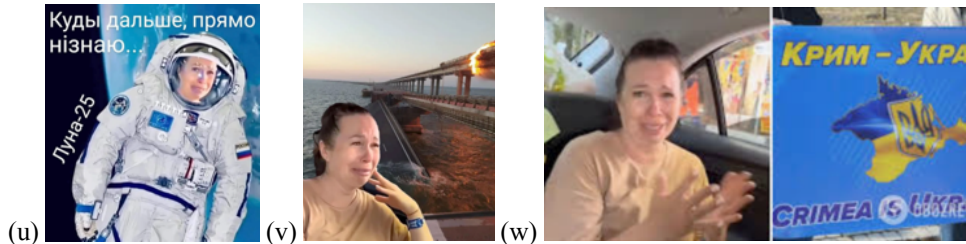
According to a similar scheme, the memes mentioned above are created based on the image of a Russian woman who does not want to leave Crimea (g → k). Here, the main character is a media person who is actively reproduced in memes. We emphasize that the speed of emergence and spread of such memes was instantaneous. And the war did not become an obstacle to this, but on the contrary, it weakened the official communication about the war on the Internet. If we point to the humorous aspect, it is manifested in the constant repetition of the image in unexpected contexts.

Here, it is important to emphasize *the background knowledge* of the recipients, who must experience the media context. So, for example, the character mentioned in memes (g – k) continues her “life” in military memes, which indicates a strong emotional impact when she appeared at the beginning of the war. Therefore, we have unexpected angles in memes and in new informational events – the accident on the Luna-25 (u), the next bombing of the Crimean bridge (v), the advance of the ZMU to the borders with Crimea (w), which are influenced by superimposition and knowledge as information subtext, as well as the “character” of memes (Figure 8).

It is interesting that the evolution of a meme is a continuous connection. And this is facilitated by the characteristics that at one time Shifman (2014) defined for a meme as universal: *Imitation – Cultural and social conditionality – Specificity and visibility – Humor and satire – Simplicity – Combination of visual and textual.*

Figure 8

Evolution of the meme (influence of the background knowledge of the recipients)



In our opinion, it is memes-personalities that are dominant during this war (this is also evident from our survey, which is represented in point 2). Personnel memes are examples of the romanticization of Ukrainian servicemen, the Ukrainian army – the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the manifestation of respect for their exploits in the form of linguistically creative production of memes. And it is also atestimony of commitment in a wide information space, accessible to everyone, to iconic persons and leaders who lead the Ukrainian state to victory. Among this group of memes, there are also generalized collective images, such as the Ghost of Kyiv, which Ukrainians and the world community initially considered to be a specific person – an ace pilot of the Air Force of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Also, a unique personality of the Ukrainian-Russian war is the combat dog-sapper Dog Patron, which receives special attention from the children’s audience.

There is also a reverse process – anti-heroization, which is manifested in the spread of memes about “heroes Z” (x – z) in the Ukrainian segment, which also creates a humorous effect for modern recipients (Figure 9).

Figure 9




“Antiheroes” in war memes



1.3. To understand / not to understand: the “success” of memes through the vision of Kyivans

At the first stage, memes related to the statements of politicians about the war and those built on the image of the heroes of this war – soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine – were selected. Also among the memes are weapons and “anti-heroes”, neology and neophraseology. The distribution of top memes recognized by all respondents and rated on a scale of 0-5 (Table 1).

Table 1
Respondent analysis table (1st wave)

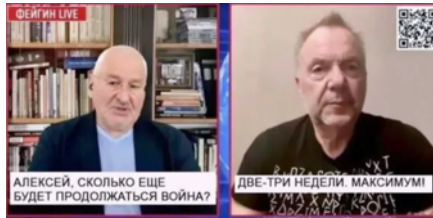
The topic of memes	Illustrations of top memes	Decoding the meme (%)	
		0-3	4-5
(i) memes about the incident with the military ship on Serpentine; neo phraseologism “send for a Russian ship”)		3, n=10%	27, n=90%
(ii) memes about Roma stealing an enemy tank		5, n=16,6%	25, n=83,4%
(iii) preemptive strike memes		2, n=92%	98, n=98%

(iv) memes about the sinking of the cruiser “Moscow”



7, n=7% 93, n=93%

(v) memes about “2–3 days” of the end of the war (neo phraseology “take in three days”)



6, n=6% 24, n=94%



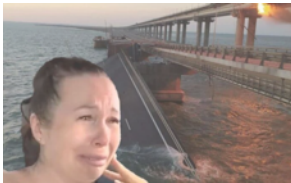

It is important to emphasize that we include only the most popular meme in the table, which respondents chose and successfully decoded (or, on the contrary, did not recognize) among others. We note that they are illustrated with the minimization of the text so that precedent and intertextuality are present, as the main characteristics of decoding memes. For example, an illustration of the *f**k you* sign in front of the ship (i), a tractor pulling a submarine (ii), a story about a preemptive strike in a supermarket (iii), the absence of a sunken ship (iv), a conversation of an aging Arestovych on the “Fagin LIVE” show (v). As we can see, the humorous effect here is achieved by the secondary nature of memes and the expanding plot.

The second wave covered the analysis of war memes during the summer period, when the war phase was in active phase. So, the main memes that were taken to be decoded by the respondents are related to the volunteering of Ukrainians, B. Johnson's arrival in Kyiv and the first strikes on the Crimean bridge. Therefore, the humorous effect of such memes was created on the balance of absurdity, sarcasm and irony. Let's show it in the form of a Table 2.

As we can see, there are no verbalized constructions or even hints in the form of words and phrases in memes. Instead, there is direct reference to visual imagery. This, in fact, achieves a humorous effect: Star Wars with the logo of volunteer S. Prytula, who is able to collect donations for an intergalactic ship (i), V. Zelenskyi's hairstyle, which is

similar to B. Johnson's hairstyle (ii), the image of a woman who did not want to leave Alushta, but now she will not be able to cross the Crimean bridge (iii), a ripe watermelon as a symbol of Ukrainian Kherson, which a soldier of the armed forces eats with his eyes closed (iv).

Table 2
Respondent analysis table (2nd wave)

The topic of memes	Illustrations of top memes	Decoding the meme (%)	
		0–3	4–5
(i) memes about collecting for “people's Bayraktar”; neo-phraseologisms “bairaktarites” and “Ukrained”)		9, n=27,2%	24, n=72,8%
(ii) memes about B. Johnson's arrival in Kyiv		5, n=15%	28, n=85%
(iii) memes about strikes on the Crimean bridge		9, n=27,2%	24, n=72,8%
(iv) memes about Kherson watermelons and the liberation of Kherson region.		8, n=24,2%	25, n=75,8%

And the third wave provided for the longest period of analysis – almost six months. The main memes centered around the settlements of Shehekavytsia and Chornobayivka, the symbols of war – the ghost

of Kyiv and Patron the dog, as well as the blackout in Ukraine and the provision of Leopards for the Armed Forces. The distribution of top memes recognized by all respondents and rated on a scale of 0–5 was as follows (Table 3).

Table 3
Respondent-analysis table (3rd wave)

The topic of memes	Illustrations of top memes	Decoding the meme (%)	
		0–3	4–5
(i) memes about Chornobayvka as a symbol of the Ukrainian struggle; neologism “black-and-white”		6, n=6%	24, n=94%
(ii) memes about the ghost of Kyiv and Patron the dog – collective images of Ukrainian heroes		5, n=16,6%	25, n=83,4%
(iii) memes about Shchekavytsa		6, n=6%	24, n=94%
(iv) memes about massive power outages in Ukraine due to massive shelling		7, n=7%	93, n=93%
(v) memes about the provision of German Leopard tanks to Ukraine		2, n=92%	98, n=98%

Decoding these memes was related to background knowledge, and therefore answers about understanding memes were not immediately given. So, for example, the meme of the choice between the bomb shelter and Shchekavitsa mountain (iii) was decoded with a special smile, because it is connected with the acquired virus on the Internet regarding the nuclear attack on Ukraine and the mass orgy in this honor on the mentioned mountain. The same can be said about the meme about mass blackouts in Ukraine (iv). The meme depicts a blow by V. Klitschko, currently the mayor of Kyiv, and the accompanying text “If you don’t turn off the lights at night, I, V. Klitschko, will turn you off”. Black humor, therefore, is conveyed with the help of phrases and word combinations, which were repeatedly expressed by the authorities as a joke (we are talking about fines and financial problems for those who do not observe the masking regime and turning off the lights in the dark season).

So, we have 100% of decoded war memes, which is influenced by respondents’ current background knowledge and interest in daily news. Among all respondents, more than 80%, n=80 at most decoded the meme (without verbal support), and only a small part (2%, n=2) did not recognize the meme at all. This may indicate either a lack of background knowledge about the event depicted in the meme, or a low sense of humor among the respondents (Syzonov, 2024).

1.4. Stylistic resource in Internet war memes: Achieving the effect of humor

The spontaneous emergence of any meme can cause a whole series of effects by which memes continue to be replicated and acquire new shades of meaning. Basically, the success of further replication of memes depends on the stylistic techniques that are laid in the basis of the meme. According to our observations, the most successful stylistic resources in war memes are precedent quotes, intertextuality, irony, sarcasm, and comparison. This resource helps predict future humorous effects.

(A) *Precedent citations.* This technique is especially relevant when it comes to an apt saying that will be delivered in a meme. Thus, the famous quote about “2–3 weeks” expressed by O. Arestovych on the air of “Fagin LIVE” was spread outside the mentioned analytical show (see memes (r) and (s), as well as derivative memes that even

may not mention primary sources). The absence of an indication of the author makes the meme a precedent, and the quotes in it come close to media phraseology – in 2–3 weeks, that is, “hope for the best, which will not come quickly”. In our opinion, it is memes that are the source of new phraseology that successfully function in the media space as an established construction with emotional and expressive coloring (Syzonov, Zlotnyk-Shagina & Kozynets, 2022).

At the beginning of the war, precedent citations were particularly vividly presented in memes. The main authors of the quotes were primarily Ukrainian politicians (V. Zelenskyi, P. Poroshenko, Yu. Tymoshenko, etc.), as well as the country's military leadership – those who were the most popular in the information field. Instead, from April 2022, this trend is changing, and already the heroes of precedent quotes in memes are ordinary Ukrainians, soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, whose authority is growing sharply in the conditions of war. Therefore, we have quotes that are aphorized in the media space and actively turn into memes (see memes about *the Crimean Bridge*, *the Ghost of Kyiv*, *Patron the dog*, etc.).

(B) Intertextuality. This technique is especially effective when relevant background knowledge is available. Often this is achieved by proximation – a special manipulative strategy of addressing events remote from the current moment:

“one of the most effective strategies for the legitimisation in political discourse is proximation, i.e. the speaker’s presentation of events on the discourse stage as directly affecting the addressee, usually in a negative or a threatening way” (Semotiuk, 2023: 39).

The author notes that the phenomenon of intertextuality is particularly realized in political memes. In our illustrations, this is clearly shown in the examples of memes (d) (e) (x). We believe that an appeal to the events of the past is important in order to achieve the desired effect, in particular a humorous one. We propose to consider internet memes in this context as semantic dominants on two levels of intertextuality: (i) vertical intertextual level, which allows establishing semantic intersections of paradigmatic-syntagmatic and associative links of memes, which ensure textual integrity; (ii) horizontal – which allows you to organize a system of textual repetitions, promotes the development of the “headline – whole text” relationship and acquires

new semantic shades (memes-transforms that are replicated in the media in connection with new current events). For example, in memes (g → h) we see one character, and her words are “mythologized” and adapted to new realities.

A separate characteristic of intertextuality in memes is their internationalization, that is, the same perception of male cultural information:

“when humor travels across borders and between nations and cultures, it acquires new interpretations – not just through translation but also through adjusting the text to the target culture, at the same time retaining a connection with the source. If the text becomes popular, this is an indication that the adaptation was successful” (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017: 28).

The adaptation of the meme to the new nationally motivated context was also present in the war memes (see memes (a – c) and the third wave of our survey). Memes in foreign languages have also successfully adapted to the Ukrainian context, which means that we can talk about the international intertextual integration of one language culture into another through memes.

(C) *Irony and sarcasm* – two close stylistic techniques with the help of which a humorous effect is realized. In modern stylistics, they are understood as interdependent phenomena: irony is a mockery, disguised as external seriousness, and sarcasm is an evil and scathing mockery, a higher degree of irony, a trope and a means of comedy. Therefore, these two techniques are understood only contextually, with mandatory negative and / or positive connotations. So, for example, the hero of the meme (z) A. Ryazantsev, the so-called *Chmonya*, became an ideal meme and a way to ironize the poverty of the Russian military. Joking videos with Chmonya are often created to the song of the Ukrainian singer Rusa “Zaruchena” (“Don’t stand under the window”), and videos with the hashtag #чмония gained millions of views on the Internet.

Memos with Russian journalists had a sarcastic tone, which for the Ukrainian recipient was associated with propaganda and nonsense (we are talking about O. Skabeeva, V. Solovyov, D. Solovyov, etc.). Their images are often used in internet war memes. According to our survey, during all three waves it was irony and sarcasm that caused memes related to these “anti-heroes” for the Ukrainian communicator.

In this context, we can recall the memes (p) and (q) associated with the Ukrainian password word “palyanytsia”, the incorrect pronunciation of which causes laughter among Ukrainians. And therefore, it also becomes the object of memes with ironic and sarcastic undertones.

(D) Comparison. This technique in memes, according to our observations, occurs in the contrasts of “*us – them*”, “*good – evil*”, “*I – we*”, etc. Our thesis is also confirmed by previous research on memes (Christopher, 2008; Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Semotiuk, 2023). During the war, such memes flooded the Ukrainian media space. So, for example, Internet memes (a), (w), (y), (z), etc. are built on comparison as a means of humor. And it is also a means of contrast between officiality and unofficiality, which is especially evident in memes of the type (a – b – c).

Comparison as a comic tool should be discussed in the context of public opinion that reacted to memes. In our survey, we often heard comparative constructions as a reaction to a meme, or a reflection on the analysis of the situation reflected in the meme. Responding to a meme through comparison is a common communicative practice (see Milner, 2013). This is especially actively implemented in memes related to political topics: see memes about a preemptive strike, the arrivals of J. Biden and B. Johnson in Kyiv, etc. (the first and second waves of our survey).

Conclusions

Internet memes of the military era are a relevant phenomenon for the mass consumer. Memes are especially actively created as a reaction to operational messages – both positive and negative. The first type includes memes about the successes of Ukrainians at the front, about the support of Western partners with weapons, about the heroization of Ukraine and Ukrainians. The second type includes memes about the shelling of the territory by the enemy, about the images of the occupiers and “anti-heroization”. As we can see, both the first and second types are quite popular in the media space and leads us to the conclusion that Internet memes are created by Ukrainians in any situation and are their humorous “shield” in a difficult situation.

Since February 24, 2022, we conducted a special study to find out the role of memes in the culture and communication of Ukrainians: more

than 300 respondents were interviewed – mainly young people who spread (and in some cases) create Internet memes themselves. The vast majority of modern war memes were created on the contrast “us / them”, which is most understood by the recipients. More than 70.0% of the respondents understand memes and it is not difficult for them to decode them. Therefore, the associations caused by the memes we proposed were only positive and had a humorous connotation, despite the complex psychological situation with the war: Internet memes of the military era became a verbalized markers of the collaborative memory of Ukrainians during the war.

It has been proven that Internet memes were decoded by almost all of the interviewees, which means that their replication in the media was instantaneous and correct. The main stylistic techniques of war memes that help to achieve the desired humorous effect are comparisons, irony and sarcasm, precedent quotes and intertextuality. It was found that the language of Internet war memes is still based on evaluation, many of them use stylistic puns and “word games”, oxymorons and stylistic gradations, as well as aphorisms and phraseological units. We believe that the strength of memes is their ability to appear at the right time and be popular in the media space. At the same time, war memes are fleeting and cannot always linger in media communication. This is a weakness of Internet memes, which must rely on the background knowledge of the recipients to correctly decode them.

ADHERENCE TO ETHICAL STANDARDS

Ethics declarations. The study complies with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration of 1964 and its later amendments. The article is based on the principles of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the Code of Ethics of the university community of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

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Author Contributions. Both the first and second authors played integral roles in conceptualizing and designing the study. **Syzonov D.:** conceptuality of the article, research methods, research data, conclusions; **Zlotnyk-Shagina O.:** processing of received practical data, research methods, conclusions.

Consent for Publication. The authors approve the publication of the current work. The work has not been, nor has it been submitted to other journals in consideration for publication. The authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Метою дослідження є з'ясування комунікативних можливостей та стилістичних функцій інтернет-мемів як вербалізованих репрезентантів мілітарного періоду (2022–...) та носіїв “спільної пам’яті” (Conte, Padulo & Fairfield, 2024) у віртуальній комунікації, що ґрунтується на соціо- та психолінгвістичному вимірах. Динаміка функціонування мемів в інформаційному просторі України пояснюється, на думку авторів, стрімким розвитком цього медіажанру, миттєвою асоціативною рефлексією на актуальні події сучасності, прецедентністю висловлювання, що закладене в інтернет-мем.

Методи і методики дослідження. Для об’єктивації результатів дослідження нами використано метод медіамоніторингу, що допоміг проаналізувати медійний простір України для виокремлення домінантних інтернет-мемів мілітарного періоду; соціологічний респондент-аналіз, що допоміг розібратися в декодуванні сучасних інтернет-мемів та визначення асоціативних рядів, які супроводжують використання інтернет-мемів в комунікації; метод стилістичного аналізу, що допоміг проаналізувати прийоми, за допомогою яких творяться / тиражуються інтернет-меми в медіа; елементи когнітивного методу для аналізу спільної пам’яті (Rajaram & Pereira-Pasaran, 2010) у сприйнятті інтернет-мемів.

Результати. Нами опитано понад 100 респондентів – в основному молодь, яка поширює (а подекуди) і сама створює інтернет-меми. Переважна більшість сучасних мемів війни була створена на контрасті “свій / чужий”, що найбільше розуміється реципієнтами. Понад 70.0% з опитаних розуміється на інтернет-мемах та їм не складно їх декодувати. Відтак асоціації, що викликали запропоновані нами інтернет-меми, були тільки позитивні та мали гумористичний підтекст, не дивлячись на складну психологічну ситуацію з війною.

Висновки. Інтернет-меми мілітарного часу стали вербалізованим маркером “спільної пам’яті” українців під час війни. І це дозволяє констатувати, що гумор у вигляді інтернет-мемів може бути як захисною реакцією українців на події війни, так і новим культурним фондом, який віддзеркалює сучасні суспільні реалії.

Ключові слова: інтернет-мем, мем війни, гумор, українські медіа, медіалінгвістика, стилістичний ресурс в інтернеті, спільна пам’ять, когнітивний аналіз.

