

Precedent Phenomena in the Process of Creating a Comic Effect in Slovak Internet Memes

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the humorous strategies and mechanism in memetic texts of the Slovak most popular satirical Internet community Zomri, which has more than 700 thousand followers on Facebook and Instagram. When examining the degree of sophistication of humour, its openness in relation to its recipients, we were interested in how often the articulations refer to universal, international, or pop culture phenomena, and to phenomena whose interpretation requires a specific Slovak linguistic and cultural competence. With the intention of comparing quantity, we created a narrower corpus of texts published on the Zomri community page in 2019 and observed the approximate proportion of use of both universal precedent (global) and national precedent (Slovak) phenomena and the ways of creating the comic effect associated with their use. We have come to the conclusion that authors of Slovak memetic texts turn to universal precedent phenomena more often than to national ones, and that the main ways of comic creation in the analysed memes were the so-called 'effect of deceived expectation and the unpredictability of the transformation and subsequent re-semanticization of the verbal or visual component of the meme'.

Keywords: Slovak media, Precedent phenomenon, Humour, Intertextual joke, Internet memes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Internet memes have become a popular phenomenon that has literally taken over the Internet space, and social media in particular. This highly intertextual and rapidly spreading phenomenon, which is mainly a combination of a funny image and text (visual and verbal components), can reflect not only current social issues, but also people's feelings, thoughts and attitudes; it also gives them the opportunity to express themselves in the best possible way. It shapes the modern linguistic picture of the world and often sets the vector for the direction and character of public discourse.

Despite the variety of existing approaches to defining and describing memes, the term 'memetics' has been established as the name of the study of memes in international practice, which was greatly facilitated by the proposal of American science journalist Douglas Hofstadter, who in January 1983 in his column in Scientific American

suggested calling the discipline that studies memes 'memetics' [1].

At the same time, we are witnessing an ongoing terminological debate in which memetic texts are now also referred to as multimodal, polycodal, and creolized. Internet memes, which nowadays make up a significant part of the content of the so-called new media, include mainly photoshopped photos, parodies, demotivators, messages, and media memes [2]. The topic of memetic texts and the comic effect associated with them are thoroughly researched by Russian linguist such as Yu. Shchurina, S. Kanashina, V. Shcherbin, V. Anisimov, Ye. Yuryeva, T. Popova, L. Duskayeva and others. In Slovakia, this issue has been dealt in detail by, for example, S. Šoltésová [3], J. Gallo [4, 5], M. Stankova [6], A. Samelova [7] and other scholars whose memetic research is mainly conducted as an interdisciplinary research, integrating the perspectives from semiotics, media linguistics, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis and text linguistics.

Our research was conducted in a similar vein; it will deal with examples of memetic texts published in 2019 on the most popular satirical website in Slovakia, Zomri – a community, which publishes humorous memetic texts, mainly on Facebook (368,000 followers) and Instagram (320,000 followers), but also on its own website (<https://www.zomri.online/>). In most cases, the authors use sharp social satire, and our research goal will be to observe the share of universal (global) and national (Slovak) intertextual references in the analyzed memes, as well as to try to further understand how they create a comic (or satirical) effect.

There are several types of Internet memes (text, video, pictures); the object of our study is solely polymodal Internet memes. In the Russian digital space, they are ‘regarded as a subspecies of polymodal texts because they consist of two parts – verbal (linguistic) and nonverbal’ [8]. Speaking about the importance of our (and other, similar) research, it is also necessary to note the fact that although most memes are intertextual in nature and contribute to the transmission of cultural heritage from generation to generation, many researchers also note that so-called anti-memes are based on ‘a set of certain tactics aimed at modeling mental mechanisms that change the moral beliefs and moral attitudes of the recipient, especially the younger generation, and thereby, in many ways, they shape a new picture of the world by using the cultural codes which are already embedded in a given area’ [9]

2. PRECEDENT PHENOMENA IN THE MEDIA AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH

2.1 Precedent Phenomena as a Manifestation of Intertextuality: Universal Precedent and National Precedent Phenomena

The main characteristics of Internet memes, which Kanashina singles out in her publication, include virality, replicability, emotionality, seriality, mimicry, minimalism of form, polymodality, relevance, wit (comicality), publicness, and fantasy [10] Based on our observations, we would like to point out their intertextual nature as a key characteristic; for example, our analysis last year of a large corpus of polymodal texts from the covers of a popular Slovak magazine, *.týždeň*, demonstrated that they were mainly of intertextual

nature, and referred both in their verbal and visual components to popular films, paintings, posters, and famous photos, as well as to precedent situations, names, texts and expressions of both historical and literary nature, while out of 271 analyzed covers (within the period of 5 years) 90 covers were of intertextual nature [11]. Similar conclusions are also made by Slovak media linguists who state that ‘memes can be characterized by several basic properties: recurrence, intertextuality, contextuality, narrativity, and directness’ [6] and that memes as units of cultural evolution are characterized by a high degree of variability and heritability [12].

In research on political, media, advertising and other discourses, in which intertextuality is increasingly used to influence the recipient, a fundamental feature and manifestation of intertextuality for Russian scholars today is the precedent phenomenon, which is characterized by the fact that it is ‘well-known to all representatives of the national linguistic and cultural community; it is topical in the cognitive and emotional space and the reference to it is constantly renewed in the speech of the representatives of the national linguistic and cultural community’ [13]. According to several representatives of Russian linguistics and cultural studies, it is hyperonymically a concept which covers precedent situation, precedent text, precedent name and precedent expression.

In theory of precedence, it is also important to understand the sphere of action of particular precedent phenomena. According to the classification proposed by Krasnykh, ‘there are social-precedent phenomena, well-known to a member of a particular social group, e.g., professional, confessional, generational; national precedent phenomena, known to every representative of the given linguistic-cultural community, and universal precedent phenomena, which are (hypothetically) known to every Homo sapiens and are part of the universal cognitive space of mankind’ [14]. In the following study of concrete memetic texts, we will be interested in the question of the share of national precedent and universal precedent phenomena in them. The given share to a large extent characterizes the modern Slovak linguistic picture of the world and the way it reflects current social events by means of international and national linguistic-cultural codes.

2.2 *Creating a Comic Effect in Memetic Texts*

An integral part of Internet communication is the comic effect, which is connected with the most important function of polymodal Internet memes – entertainment. In the modern media space, we observe a desire for entertainment, which is presented as emotional pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment and a distraction from everyday worries, which, in turn, can be considered a compensatory need of a person, as well as an important factor in the regulation of emotional life [15]. The comic effect is a complex social, biological and psychological phenomenon that arose simultaneously with the essential elements of the human psyche – language and thinking. At the heart of the comic effect is a sharp discrepancy between the real essence of what the phenomenon represents, and what it pretends to be. In the perception of a comic text, the emotion of amazement prevails. According to Sigmund Freud, the sense of the comic appears because jokes and witticisms have the ability to bypass the so-called internal 'censors'; the barriers established by one's culture [16]. Therefore, most researchers state that the main ways of creating a comic effect in polymodal texts are through: 1) the effect of deceived expectation; 2) contradiction or inconsistency of visual (iconic) and verbal components of the meme; 3) the unpredictability of transformation and subsequent re-semanticization of the verbal or visual component of the meme. In essence, and according to Russian media linguists, in each of the similar cases we are talking about the emergence of the comic effect and humor as the 'contradiction between essence and appearance of the phenomenon' [17].

In the following subchapters, we will take a closer look at both the peculiarities of the creation of the comic effect in the studied memes, as well as at what kind of precedent phenomena their creators most often turn to.

2.3 *Universal Precedent Phenomena and National Precedent Phenomena in Memes Published on the Zomri Community Page in 2019¹*

We find the most complicated humorous communicative acts to interpret are those which realize verbal humor and update idioms and titles of films, literary works, quotes from them, and signs known to a common speaker of a language and culture and which evoke in their consciousness a sum of connotations and associations. In the process of examining the degree of sophistication of humor and its openness in relation to recipients, we were interested in how often articulations refer to universal, internationally known phenomena and how often to the phenomena whose interpretation requires a specific linguistic competence. For the purpose of this quantitative comparison, we created a narrower corpus from the texts published on the Zomri community page in 2019.

A range of 91-132 texts was published per month on the monitored page in 2019, while the humorous multimodal texts labeled by their creators as 'memes' were prevailing. Of the aforementioned 91-132 texts published monthly on the page, at most about 20 of them referred to internationally known texts, mostly pop culture films and series. Based on our observations, we assume that the selection of internationally known texts may be stimulated by the phonetic form of their title and the aspect of the target subjected to comic interpretation (Terminator → Termenator, Ranger → Genger, Miss Peregrine → Miss Pellegrini), which is created by an external resemblance between a fictional character or between the plot and protoevent. In the case of scripts that are evoked in these ways, we can consider macro-positions 'national-non-national' and 'fictional-real', which, however, at a lower level, also include other oppositions, or contrasts, e.g. 'strong-weak', 'original-copy', 'good-bad'.

Updating internationally known texts does not provoke rejection from recipients and can also stimulate the continuation of a strategically coherent language game.

In the corpus, we single out individual sporadic statements referring to Czech films (in January 2019, for example, up to four), which are

1. Other aspects of multimodal texts published on Zomri community page were further analyzed by the authors in the paper *Uštipačnosť* and correctness in Slovak online humor (in print).

intensively received due to their cultural and linguistic proximity in the Slovak space, and what is paradoxical is that, in contrast to Slovak films, their characters and statements are also frequently updated (especially films such as *Pelíšky* [Cosy Dens] and *Tankový prapor* [The Tank Battalion]), as well as texts referring to the period of socialism (developing topics through the concept of scarce goods), but also texts referring to popular films of the period of socialist Czechoslovakia (*Pat a Mat* [Pat and Mat], *Spadla z oblakov* [She Fell from the Sky], *Krtko* [Mole]). All these, similarly to Slovak linguistic cultureemes, narrowly limit the successful implementation of a humorous act.

Linguistically and culturally specific texts are updated up to about 10 times monthly in our corpus, in the comic interpretation of events or people. They update Slovak idioms (e.g. *nastaviť niekomu zrkadlo* [holding a mirror up to someone], *dobré málo býva* [all excellent things are rare]), popular songs, titles of children's books, movies, shows, or fairy tales (*Ako išlo vajce na vandrovku* [How the Egg Goes for a Wander], *Budkáčik a Dubkáčik*, *Majster N* [Master N]), formats of entertaining shows (*Pošta pre teba* [There's Mail for You], *Inkognito* [Incognito], *Smotánka* [The Cream of Society]), statements of politicians which have become viral ('*Človek človeku*' ['Person to person'], '*S Pánom Bohom nejdem od vás*' ['I'm not leaving in the name of God']). We present them in such detail that it is clear that their proper decoding requires first and foremost a familiarity not only with the cultural texts of status that we encounter when learning the Slovak language, but also the experience with texts that we are confronted with in school and preschool facilities when watching television shows and reading the press, and in everyday life in a given linguistic community and in a given language.

The familiarity is also necessary in terms of the associations that certain images evoke. We illustrate this with another example.

2.4 National Precedent Phenomena as a Limited-access Joke. Case: *Skalické Diplomý*²

The multimodal text *Skalické diplomý* (Diplomas from Skalica)³ is a reaction to a

2. This example was used and analysed by N. Cingerová also in the article *Memetic text as a Fragment of Public Discourse* (2020) to point out how memes function as a way of social criticism [19].

plagiarism scandal involving two Slovak politicians at the University of Central Europe in Skalica. It is constructed with the help of the modes of image (photoshopped photo) and writing (verbal commentary as a means of anchoring the image) and it evokes scripts [cf. 18] which are evoked by verbal and nonverbal signs: 1) a marketplace (a photoshopped photo depicting a food truck with the sign *Skalické diplomý* and the announcement *Akcia: balíček diplom + dizertácia zľava 30%* [Special offer package: diploma + dissertation thesis – 30% discount]), where the saleswoman is selling master's theses instead of the expected *Skalický trdelník* – a traditional Slovak pastry made of yeast dough in the shape of a hollow (dutý) cylinder (the Slovak word *dutý* is also used in student slang in the sense of a student unprepared for class or an exam; someone who knows nothing) and 2) the university (which is represented and evoked by the theses stacked up on the food truck counter). The laughing reaction is provoked by the opposition between the high and the low (the university and the marketplace: the product of intellectual activity whose purpose is to satisfy cognitive needs, and the product which serves to satisfy physiological needs). We also observe the laughing reaction in the dialogue on the facebook page, for which it was the impetus, as well as the fact that, as in the aforementioned example, the communicants accept the play and further elaborate on the elements evoked by the scripts. Thus, the collective unfolding of a comic interpretation of a protoevent occurs. However, we consider the meme-message itself to be a limited-access joke. Indeed, in order to decode it, besides a familiarity with the protoevent (the plagiarism scandal), we also need to identify the phrase with which the articulated phrase *Skalické diplomý* enters into paradigmatic relations, and to use both linguistic competence and cultural competence, since the food truck from which the pastry is usually sold serves as a visual aid (an element from the evoked mental space). At the same time, it can also be viewed as an indexical feature evoking the environment where the food truck is often found – the marketplace. These decodings also allow for the comic interpretation observed in the dialogue to unfold. The comic interpretation relies on a) the phonological resemblance with the word *trdlo* (a *oprávňujú hrdo nosiť titul Skalické trdlo* [which allows the plagiarists to proudly hold the title *Skalické trdlo*]; *trdlo* is a mild insult used to describe someone who

3. <https://www.zomri.online/2020/07/24/skalicke-diplomy/>.

is slow-witted) and with the word *trtkat'* (a vulgar word which refers to sexual intercourse; the blend *trtelník* is used in relation to Boris Kollár, one of the politicians involved in the plagiarism scandal who, according to the tabloid press, is known to have 11 children with 10 women, an aspect which often represents him metonymically in humorous texts of the community) and b) cultural experience with the marketplace, leaflet advertising, life in small towns and villages, where advertising and news is announced by a PA system (Hlásenie miestneho rozhlasu [The announcement of the local PA system [...]]).

As we can see from the aforementioned analysis, the knowledge of Slovak culture and social contexts is necessary for the adequate perception of the complex semantics of the multimodal text *Skalické diplomy*. The comic effect is created as a consequence of the opposition between the high and the low, and as an effect of defeated expectancy (selling diplomas instead of the traditional pastry), but all shades of humour are readable exclusively for representatives of the Slovak linguistic-cultural community.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the corpus of the studied memetic texts has shown that Slovak authors of memes of satirical social topics turn to universal precedent phenomena more often than to their own Slovak national precedent ones. Out of the nearly 130 meme excerpts, approximately 20 referred to internationally known texts, mostly American or British pop culture films and series, musicians, famous computer games, but also buildings or literary and legendary figures. Only 10 memetic texts were linked to Slovak linguo-culturemes, and 4 memes referred to Czech films, which are not only intensively reciprocated but also perceived as 'proper' in the Slovak environment due to their cultural and linguistic proximity.

In this case, the conclusions of our previous studies were confirmed, in which we noted that 'in the process of the analysis of media texts, researchers encounter two cases of forming an intertextual joke: one is based on the humorous essence of the used precedent phenomena (Gargantua, Tartuffe, Charlie Chaplin) and another one is based on the emergence of the comic effect due to the inconsistency of the connotative meaning of the precedent phenomenon and the situation (context) in which it is used, based on the discovery of a contradiction between essence and appearance

of the phenomenon. In particular, this involves the cases of creating a humorous effect in describing a situation that is, by its very nature, not comic. It is a frequent contrast between the seriousness of the subject and the look at it by the comic optics' [11]. The social satire that prevails in memes today articulates mostly serious social topics, but this does not prevent the emergence of a comic effect that is not linked to the humorous context of the thematized event, but is created as an effect of deceived expectation and the unpredictability of the transformation and subsequent re-semantization of the verbal or visual component of the meme.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nina Cingerova - formulation of scientific hypotheses, excerption, analysis and interpretation of data from the corpus of memetic texts from the *zomri.sk* website. Irina Dulebova - formulation of scientific hypotheses, analysis of the current state of the research problem, synthesis of the findings.

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