

# New Characteristics of Current Neology: Social Background

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**Abstract.** Neology remains a topical issue of current linguistics. Though there are numerous studies devoted to this field, one may find neither a generally accepted definition of “neologisms” (also “new words”, etc.), nor a commonly recognized terminology (or classification). Moreover, nowadays we may face new phenomena which are probably subjects of neology, but which are often too peculiar and thus cannot be called pure “neologisms” in accordance with the criteria given for the definition of “neologisms” (“new words”, etc.). Some of these phenomena are of multimodal character, since natural language is combined with codes of different systems. Therefore, they are not purely linguistic objects. Internet memes, being a type of precedent phenomena, may be considered an example of such objects. Another feature of current neology is the presence of words with “blurred” meaning, as well as those of numerous diminutives. The authors believe that these characteristic features may have certain social background. Thus, formation of new units could be investigated within the context of sociobiology. There may be a few key factors, such as increasing aggression, social infantilism, clip thinking, a new stage of human civilization, and a new type of cultural transmission.

## 1 Introduction

Due to continuous changes of natural language, neology remains a topical issue of linguistic studies. Neology as a branch of science, which was founded in the 1960s, is under active development, since there are numerous new phenomena in language and in speech. We must point out that the notion of a “neologism” is getting more blurred, whereas multiple research works devoted to neology formation and new scientific doctrines appear.

There are some reasons to believe that the term “neologism” (which, in fact, is an ambiguous notion), mainly applied to words or their meanings over the past decades, may now denote more phenomena, which have their own peculiarities. The special characteristics of current neology, discussed further in the article, may allegedly be predetermined by a number of social processes.

## 2 Main Part

Firstly, it should be noted that multimodal nature of language has become particularly evident over the last ten years. This subject has been investigated by numerous scientists, such as G.R. Kress, T.V. Leeuwen, H.W. Eyger, W.L. Yukht, Y.A. Sorokin, E.F. Tarasov, E.A. Grishina, G.E. Kreidlin, A.A. Kibrik. Multimodality is a field in the theory of communication and social semiotics which describes communication as a unity of textual, aural, linguistic, spacial, and visual “modes”, used to create a message. There are also some

similar terms: “polycode”, “creolization” (the given notions may be used as synonyms). Polycode may be defined as a combination of natural language with another semiotic system code. Multimodality is a more general term, which deals with all aspects of communication, whereas polycode, in its turn, is a more narrow notion, applied to natural language and its combinations with codes of different systems. The multimodal nature of language is clearly manifested in computer communication, which has become an integral part of life in developed countries. This is due to the fact that computer communication is mostly carried out by means of “barren” written text, devoid of paralinguistic features, that are typical of oral speech “face-to-face”. For that reason those who communicate modify their messages, using, for example, pictures and emoticons, clipped and altered words, acronyms and erratic words (i.e. intentionally used in a wrong way) in order to reduce typing time and convey their ideas precisely and vividly, etc. [1].

As language multimodality is increasing, a lot of new, more complex phenomena appear, which are not totally linguistic and cannot be called pure “neologisms” in accordance with the existing criteria. Nonetheless these units should not be neglected, due to their abundance and popularity. First of all, these are Internet memes, being a type of precedent phenomena. In the broad sense of the word, memes are units, transmitting and preserving cultural information. Their major characteristic is replication. Accordingly, Internet memes are information units, objects, which get very popular (in most cases, spontaneously) in IT medium.

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Alongside text memes, meme pictures and video memes, one may come across phenomena that are more complicated. These are so-called creolized memes, a fusion of a text and a visual component. Internet memes are a type of precedent texts, i. e. they may convey information about those texts, as well as information resources, cultural phenomena or historical events, which laid ground for these memes. Having cultural connotation, a meme makes it possible to identify the corresponding precedent phenomenon [2].

There are numerous types of such Internet memes in modern research papers (memes of right and wrong actions; memes, representing differences, for example, “expectations” versus “reality”; memes, based on media events; memes, conveying ideological messages; memes, which are news interpretation; etc.).

New Internet memes are born as current social events, exciting ideas and social experience are interpreted within Internet communities [3].

A meme “the son of mom’s friend” (in Russian it is “сын маминой подруги”), which has been quite popular recently, may serve to illustrate this. This one refers to an imaginary character, whom mothers often hold up as an example to their children. In his childhood, “the son of mom’s friend” does well at school, goes in for sports, and wins various competitions. An adult “son of mom’s friend” succeeds, earns a lot, owns an expensive car, buys an apartment, and runs his business. The function of the given meme is to laugh at parents, who make inappropriate comparisons. “The son of mom’s friend” is a generalized folklore character, who cannot be attributed to only one author. First jokes about this character appeared on the Web in 2010–2011. Initially those were schoolgirls, making fun of a boy, who wasn’t really handsome, whom mothers and their friends were trying to fix them up with. These jokes started to proliferate in 2016. As a rule, they were about non-existing achievements of young men, rather than about their real success, that their moms were bragging of [4]. Gradually “the son of mom’s friend” began to turn into a genius, an almost heavenly creature. It started to be merged with other memes (— Are you a real son of Mom’s friend? — Yes, I am. — Can you say anything in the son of Mom’s friend’s language (in Russian it is “на маминоподругском”)? — Yesterday I bought a two-room apartment in the centre of the city. I’m going to use it as an office for my fifth start-up, but first I’d like to check with the Governor.) [5].

In 2019, this meme was used in a commercial, produced by a cellular operator “Beeline”.

This example demonstrates that memes can evolve, and be transformed over time, which sometimes takes quite a while.

Demotivational posters are a type of Internet memes, which usually consist of a picture, centered and bordered in black, with a title written below (i.e. we may see a fusion of visual and verbal parts). Obviously, demotivational posters possess the same characteristics as language in the traditional meaning of this word. Firstly, they are means of communication (thus having communicative function). Secondly, they help learn new information about reality (and that is a cognitive

function). Thirdly, demotivational posters help preserve and transmit knowledge about the world around, traditions, culture, and history (in this case having accumulating function). Besides, demotivational posters serve to express feelings and emotions (emotive function). Finally, they perform the function of influence (voluntative function) [6].

As has already been mentioned, memes are a category of precedent phenomena. So-called precedent texts, particularly those, used in chat communication, have been increasingly analyzed in research papers of the last decade. Researchers define them as texts, which, being important for a person in terms of cognition or emotions, are well known to everybody around this person (including both predecessors and successors). They are regularly used within the discourse of a given linguistic personality. Precedent texts refer to the background knowledge of those, who communicate, which is not a part of the word definition. These may be speech patterns, phraseological units, and sayings. As noted by researchers, most often such precedent texts are clipped, and only parts of them are used (for example, “лучше один раз увидеть...”). Precedent texts may function as they are or be modified. If a precedent text is transformed deliberately, it causes semantic change (for example, “drug poznaetsya v ede” (“друг познается в еде”), “delu vremya a potekhe chat” (“делу время, а потехе чат”). This forms a thought complex in the mind of a listener, which comprises “recognition” of the initial precedent in the actualized text, its meaning decoding (based on background knowledge, related to its usage), correlation of this text with the clipped or altered precedent text, as well as semantic interpretation of the modified precedent text [7].

Such transformed precedent texts are new units, which, probably, cannot be defined as pure “neologisms” in accordance with the existing classifications.

Another feature of present-day communication is the emergence of new specific units, which have quite “blurred” meaning.

The word “zhiza” (“жиза”) may serve as an example. Apparently, the word is a clipping of “zhiznenno” (“жизненно”). This may mean “life”, “dwelling”, as well as “zhiznenno”. Moreover, the word is frequently used to denote a man, who is often annoying and keeps making excuses. This may also stand for a situation, which we often face in real life. Judging by the material that we have, the word under consideration may sometimes get quite different meaning, which is not totally clear. These are some examples of the word usage: “Guess what, today I was walking, slipped on the ice and fell straight into a meltwater puddle! — Man, it’s zhiza, yesterday I did the same!”. “Yesterday I fell asleep early. — It’s zhiza!”. “It’s zhiza, bro!”

Let us give another example of a popular word with a blurred meaning: “dich” (“дичь”). Firstly, nowadays this word (in addition to its primary meaning, registered in explanatory dictionaries) may imply that something unpleasant is going on: “What the hell is going on here? That’s some dich’!” Secondly, the word “dich” may be a swear word, denoting a barbarous uncultured man: “What a dich’ you are, I never thought you’d do

something like this!” This word is also used to mean doubtful information, absurdity and nonsense: “I’m absolutely sure that you are talking dich’ (= nonsense)”.

Besides, the word “dich” may be applied to a person whose ethical principles do not comply with generally accepted standards; or it might be used to talk about some funny information, etc. [8]

Thirdly, analyzing peculiar characteristics of current Internet communication, we should note the emergence of numerous diminutives (i. e. hypocoristic forms). Their usage is probably determined by the hybrid nature of social networks discourse medium, which is written and oral at the same time. Since oral communication, which gets the form of written speech in social networks, is characterized by particularly confidential nature, usage of words with subjective assessment suffixes is a way of achieving the desired communication goal. It is possible to define a few fields of speech interaction, in which diminutives may be found most frequently. These are the following fields: “home communication”, “link between generations”, “pets”, “food”, “etiquette of communication”, “irony and sarcasm”. It is exactly in Internet discourse that diminutiveness is expressed in a fundamentally new way through an extensive use of diminutives. The corresponding Russian term is “mimimishnyj language” (“мимишный язык”) [9]. This may be illustrated by the following words: “mimimishki” (“мимимышки”), “kotiki” (“котики”), “nyashki” (“няшки”), “vkusnyashki” (“вкусняшки”), “obnimashki” (“обнимашки”), “chmoki” (“чмоки”), “kinchiki” (“кинчики”), “beremenyashki” (“беременяшки”), “pichal’ka” (“пичалька”), etc. [10].

It has been mentioned before that the considered features of modern communication may be determined by a number of factors.

The origins of brand-new phenomena can speculatively be studied within the context of sociobiology. N.A. Zinovieva addresses this issue in her work summarizing the findings of different scientists such as R. Dawkins and R. Aunger. She states that the ways of transmitting information evolve along with the culture of the community.

E.g. according to the neuro-memetic approach, the emergence of memes is connected with the nature of human psyche: the process of evolution gives birth to independent indivisible information units that are acquired and preserved by a culture. These units convey both biological and cultural information. They are important in terms of adaptation to the social environment and provide an evolutionary advantage, as well as an opportunity to have a higher social status [3].

According to the sociolinguistic approach, the necessity to manifest verbal aggression frequently underlies the emergence of creolized texts. In modern information space “polite verbal behaviour” more often gives place to the aggressive model of communication. The opportunity of anonymous communication allows the members of forums and other social online resources to avoid responsibility for their words, creating the feeling of impunity. Hence, studying verbal aggression on the Internet becomes a current trend of linguistic research.

Aggression in creolized texts is usually aimed at a wide audience and has social, cultural and political character.

Such texts are often created to provoke negative reaction, i.e. irritation, indignation, etc. In this situation, the functions of verbal aggression partially coincide with the functions of trolling and cyberbullying. First of all, verbal aggression is manifested in politics (discreditation of political opponents, spreading allegations and rumours). It can be illustrated by the cartoon snapshot featuring Winnie-the-Pooh with the words “The political system in Russia is strange: it is difficult to say whether democracy exists or not.” Secondly, the sphere of culture is also a good medium for the discussed phenomenon (e.g. mocking at the principles and norms of morality, tacit laws and traditions, foreign or one’s own culture). It can be proved by the meme containing several images of laughing Tom Cruise and the message “The ban on foreign music and movies will trigger the development of Russian culture.” Thirdly, the sphere of international relations should be mentioned (e.g. asserting oneself through humiliating the representatives of other ethnic groups). It is exemplified by the meme “Somewhere in the Caucasus” depicting a monkey lying on the ground with a machine gun. The fourth sphere is the social one with the aim of highlighting different social problems. A corresponding meme contains a banner encouraging the citizens to keep the city clean and a landfill located directly under the banner. It runs “Social advertising: extremely effective.” The spread of verbal aggression over the Internet in many respects reflects the moral state of society. More often people do not pay attention to the personality, problems, and feelings of others, have cynical reaction to the attempts of initiating communication [11]. Such phenomena may be explained to some extent by the level of aggression in society.

The rising level of aggression has turned into a tendency of the last decade. Verbal aggression is becoming a trait of modern society that makes it a rather topical object of linguistic research. Mass media are turning into one of the channels of aggression spreading. The modern economic relations with fierce competition significantly encourage people to use and spread verbal units with aggressive meaning. On the whole, aggression is perceived as an acceptable norm and is frequently justified and approved by society [12].

It is supposed that according to the socially determined reasons extensive use of diminutives (“mimimishnyj language”, “мимишный язык”) may be connected with the popularity of anime influenced Japanese culture among the youth. Due to this the excessive and very expressive meaning of cuteness, affection, kawaiiiness (derived from “kawaii”) is being introduced into Internet communication [9].

There is an opinion according to which the abundance of diminutives shows the existence of so-called mental infantilism [10]. This point of view has the right to exist as the latest findings indicate that modern society is becoming more immature. Infantilism has the following traits (each separately or all together): dependence, inability to make independent decisions, lack of the desire to find adult solutions to problems,

unwillingness to develop oneself, lack of life goals, selfishness, egocentrism, irresponsibility, tendency to addictions, inability to adapt, lack of social promotion, opportunism [13]. At the current stage of society development scientists point out that social and cultural maturing lags behind the biological one. The needs, emotions, behavior of a person often do not correspond to one's biological age. The so-called external attitudes are noted. It means that an individual is significantly influenced by external environment, as well as the importance attached to it by the individual. People of external type blame circumstances, the ones around them but not themselves for their own successes and failures. Social immaturity may be caused by the impairment of socialization mechanism (e.g. insufficient participation of the family as an agent of primary socialization in upbringing and transfer of educational functions to other institutions). Another important factor is lack of a role model. In traditional society young people used to model their conduct on senior family (group) members and learned from them. Nowadays due to liberalization processes, modern society no longer has enough respect and appreciation for people of old age. Individuals do not strive for acquiring wisdom and knowledge over the years. The rising generation is interested in completely different things. They are not in any hurry to grow up and become more mature. Young people prefer to remain immature children as long as possible. As a result, the body undergoes natural changes, but the emotional and psychological state does not progress. Moreover, "never-ending" youth has become the norm both for Russian society and for European society as a whole. There is a cult of youth; people try to avoid ageing. They do not want to get older and are afraid of ageing as society does not accept and value greying population as it used to. Getting older, people become unwanted and abandoned [14].

In a broader sense, the described processes may be considered as the result of a global change in the model of intergenerational relationships. Margaret Mead, a famous American anthropologist, in the 60s–70s of the XX century predicted that the succession of generations would vanish from the society of the future. It is referred to as the change of culture types. Postfigurative culture, in which the children learn chiefly from their ancestors, and configurative culture, in which both children and adults learn from their peers, give way to prefigurative culture, in which adults typically learn from younger generations. In the twentieth century, young people from all parts of the world, connected by the electronic communications network, gained common experience, which is almost unobtainable for their seniors. Meanwhile the younger generation will never share the unprecedented experience of their predecessors with its succession of global changes. The generation gap has become an entirely new, global and universal phenomenon [15].

Perhaps the diversity, frequency of emergence and specificity of new units are indeed to some extent due to the cultural model change. Changes no longer go slowly and do not remain unnoted. Modern life is characterized by high speed, rapid development of science,

technology, and other areas. Myriad of changes occurring constantly influence the speed of emergence of new language phenomena. New mechanisms of changing and transmitting culture arise, not similar to postfigurative and cofigurative ones. Of course, it cannot be definitely asserted that the younger generation no longer learns from their parents. Still the young representatives of society often tend to be the most active ones (due to the development of information technologies). They are better adapted to the rapidly changing reality and accept these changes easier. As a result young people become teachers for the older generations who have problems with understanding modern reality and getting used to it. Young individuals play the leading role in the formation of new language units, as well as the peculiar units that cannot be called purely linguistic. The specificity of the emerging units is increasingly determined by the Internet space, since it and information technologies in general are of great importance in the life of young members of society.

Speaking of the constantly increasing role of younger generations, we should mention one more important aspect – their so-called "clip thinking". The works devoted to this new type of thinking date back to the twentieth century. The American sociologist and futurologist Alvin Toffler was one of the first to talk about the phenomenon of clip culture. Currently, this phenomenon is becoming more pronounced [16].

Perhaps, Toffler was right and industrialism (which, in turn, followed the agricultural stage) has been replaced by the new type of civilization: the so-called Third Wave. The Third Wave brings people a huge amount of new information constantly forcing them to revise the "card file of images" that create the mental model of reality [17].

Later on other researchers considered the phenomenon of new thinking. It was studied by the Russian scientists F.I. Girenok, K.G. Frumkin, T.V. Semenovskikh, etc. According to the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, society at the present stage of its development is being transformed into "e-society" or "a global village". In this context, electronic means of communication determine the multidimensional perception of the world. Human thinking returns to the pre-text era, and the linear sequence of signs ceases to be the basis of culture. A universal definition of clip thinking does not exist; however, its main features are mosaic and fragmented perception of the world, unwillingness to deal with huge "linear" texts, reflection of many properties of objects without taking into account the connections between them. In this context, the information flow is characterized by fragmentation, irrationality and heterogeneity of incoming data. The speed of switching between the parts of this information is high as well [16]. Perhaps these fragmentation and inconsistency of the information flow and its perception lead to the blurring of word meanings.

### 3 Conclusion

Thus, it may be assumed that the brand new language phenomena that have been observed in recent decades and the current language “blurring” are really to some extent due to a number of factors. They are the features of modern society (immaturity of youth, clip thinking, the influence of foreign culture), a new stage of civilization development and a global change in intergenerational relationships, the increased multimodality of natural language as a result of the spread of information technologies, the evolution-based emergence of new types of information units.

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