"Polycode" irony as a sign of modern media-political discourse

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Abstract. The purpose of this research is to conduct a comprehensive linguoculturological analysis of verbal and non-verbal means of expressing "polycode" irony in modern Russian political discursive practices. In the process of problem-solving research uses different methods and approaches of discourse analysis: a functional analysis of corpora of political texts of the Russian language; pragmatic analysis of speech acts and communicative; stylistic analysis revealing the specifics of genre specific political practices; the linguistic and cultural interpretation; the descriptive-logical methods of categorical mapping units and their subsequent economicaly. The article deals with the main functions and roles of "polycode" irony in political media space. In the study, the authors identify the key functions, high significance and abundance of "polycode" irony in media-political discourse. The article contains a linguistic analysis that has contributed to identifying main rhetorical devices most commonly used to create "polycode" irony.

1 Introduction

As is known, such a cognitive-expressive device as irony helps to question long-established principles, rules and norms; irony is born out of a joke and turns into a paradox. Irony is based on double coding, comparing several textual styles, quoting, comparing, using precedent texts, occasional words and parodies which determines the opportunity to interpret irony variably.

The functions of irony in the context of media-political discourse may vary depending on the situation, however, three of them are the most common. The first function is a covert attack on an opponent and an expression of aggression. Irony gives a political text figurativeness, brightness; the text becomes more memorable and affects the audience more strongly. The second significant function of irony can be a politician's linguistic self-expression – the transmission of their personal attitude to the situation. The third function is to add a humorous effect to political news.

2 Background

Since modern political discourse is broadcast in the media, YouTube and social networks, then, accordingly, these means of transmitting information are an integral part of political discourse and the created communicative portrait is directly addressed to the masses, "media resources become not only a sphere and a means of its existence but also act as subjects of political activity. Therefore, the political discourse of the 21st century includes

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new groups of native speakers among and acquires new forms that make it possible to actualize and broadcast even such types of political activity that have not previously had legitimate forms of manifestation" [1]. It is not surprising that irony gradually fills not only the information space of television, radio, Internet, social networks but also, being realized in memes, sketch shows, stand-up, rap, animated films, short videos, Instagram and TikTok format, becomes part of the entertainment content.

Currently, memes, short videos published on TikTok and Instagram and stand-up comedians' performances are the most popular and widespread Internet phenomena. These phenomena often become a means of political propaganda or, conversely, discrediting the opponent. Internet memes can be expressed in various formats: short videos, pictures with captions, texts, slogans, etc. However, the most popular is the picture meme which is typically a black square with a photo of a famous person in the center and an ironic or grotesque text. V.A. Glukhikh and S.M. Eliseev note that "The use of Internet memes in election campaigns represents a new trend in modern politics" [3]. An analysis of major political events, including the elections (the 2013 Mayoral election in Moscow, the 2018 presidential elections in the Russian Federation, the 2019 elections to the Moscow City Duma) confirmed Glukhikh and Eliseev's point that memes are a powerful tool of political influence and play a significant role in establishing the political context.

3 Method

For further description, we should stress that modern Internet trends associated with political discourse can be viewed from various aspects: as a folklore phenomenon that expresses the people's response to various political events or statements or as a PR campaign for politicians and their teams. In the first case, this is a spontaneous, unmanageable and uncontrolled phenomenon, and in the second case, the creation of each meme has a specific goal (control of public consciousness, endowing a particular politician with good or negative qualities) and is included in the strategy of the entire PR campaign.

4 Analysis

In the article, we analyze the "polycode" irony expressed in the aforementioned Internet trends and its main functions.

The first and most important function of "polycode" irony is the expression of opinion. This is facilitated by the vastness of social networks, "the Internet environment as a space for open communication, discussion and expression of opinion" [2]. Memes are often bitterly ironic in nature; people allow themselves to publish what they really think without hiding behind ethics and without fear of condemnation. This phenomenon is associated with anonymity. This is the rare case when people cease to be a passive recipient of political information and can form an ironic-political space themselves, uniting in Internet communities, commenting on articles on online media and distributing memes, videos and texts on social networks.

As an example, let us look at a 2018 meme dedicated to the presidential elections in the Russian Federation (Fig. 1). The meme uses photos of all candidates, except for V.V. Putin, V.V. Zhirinovsky and K.A. Sobchak, i.e. (from left to right) P.N. Grudinin, S.N. Baburin, M.A. Suraykin, B.Yu. Titov and G.A. Yavlinsky with an ironic caption "Who.are.these.people?". The author expresses an ironic attitude towards presidential candidates while simultaneously using several stylistic devices in one short sentence. Immediately after reading, we note the rhetorical question and rhetorical address. Through parcellation, the author intonationally emphasizes the unimportance of Putin's rivals participating in the election race. The pausation emphasizes the ironic attitude not only to

the people shown in the picture but also to the upcoming elections and their anticipated results. Moreover, the meme uses meiosis manifested in verbal accompaniment and reinforcing the belittling of the candidates' merits. Furthermore, this meme is a vivid example of the most common stylistic device used in political Internet memes to create irony – response, i.e. the question asked is seemingly spoken on behalf of the audience, in this case, the people, and assumes an answer on behalf of the speaker, here – the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. The polycode nature of irony in this example is implemented using the relationship between the image and several stylistic devices.

Fig.1 Translation: Who.are.these.people?

The second example of expressing opinions using "polycode" irony in the media-political space is also associated with the presidential election in the Russian Federation (Fig. 2). The ironic effect is created by semiotics. In this example, "polycode" irony is expressed by allusion, antithesis, that is, the opposition presidential candidate (P.N. Grudinin) is contrasted with the current president (V.V. Putin); hypotyposis – the subject of irony is clearly demonstrated in the meme; concession – the viewer is not presented with the third picture depicting P.N. Grudinin's indignation, therefore, the politician is content with such a "transformation"; meiosis – the presidential candidate does not defend own merits, possible advantages.

Fig. 2. Translation: 'How do you want it cut?' 'Cut it so that all Russians love me'

The second function – the expression of protest – is becoming increasingly popular. This is due to the complication of the registration of approved meetings, organizational issues, etc. The above contributes to the search for new platforms for expressing opinions – simpler but no less efficient. The internet is a great way to express discontent and ironic memes are the most readily available medium. On the Internet, everyone can afford to ridicule even the most influential politicians of our time. For example, in Fig. 3, the object of irony is the results of voting for the State Duma presented live by the TV channel "Russia 24". In the meme, a screenshot of the table is used that shows the number of votes for each party as a percentage. The reader pays particular attention to the meme as it uses a rhetorical address and apostrophe addressed to the person currently on the other side of the screen as indicated by the personal pronoun "you". The author of the meme uses a rhetorical question to attract the attention of Internet users because people often "scroll" and may not pay attention to the numbers let alone start counting them. Simultaneously with the aforementioned stylistic devices, there is a message in the meme, i.e. a figure suggesting a question addressed to the audience and an answer on behalf of the audience, even for themselves but the person says in their mind that they either did not vote or voted once. All this creates a contradiction that is the basis of irony.

Fig. 3. (Translation: 146.47%??? and how many times did you vote?)

The next example (Fig. 4) illustrates the response of Russians to the set of new sanctions imposed by the countries of the European Union against Russia. In this case, the creolized text is the conductor of polycode irony. The non-verbal component of the meme (personality, facial expressions) complements rhetorical questions. It becomes clear that the questions come from V.V. Putin and are addressed to Western politicians. When reading the second rhetorical question *"Is there enough insulating tape?"* in the literal sense (hypotyposis), one notes several stylistic devices at once – a hint and allusion to a well-known fact. Moreover, in this example, polycode irony is based on paronomasia, apostrophe, questioning, homeology, borrowings, puns, wit, epilemma and rhetorical address.

Fig. 4. (Translation: Do you want to isolate Russia? Is there enough insulating tape?)

The third function of "polycode" irony is mockery, witticism and ridicule. According to M.N. Prorokova, "At all times, laughter has been the most powerful political weapon" [5]. In the modern world of widespread digitalization and "display text" (V.G. Kostomarov's

term), the consolidation of irony and one of the most common Internet manifestations of the comic is quite natural [4]. Such an amalgamation can be seen as the result of reinterpreting the flow of political information through the prism of humor. Not only events, persons but also politicians' odious phrases, behavior and appearance commonly become the object of irony. The third function of irony is often achieved in memes with the help of grotesque, hyperbole, satire, bringing the situation to the point of absurdity and using precedent cultural phenomena. To illustrate this function, let us refer to Fig. 5.

The meme takes one back to the period of the election race for the post of President of the Russian Federation (2018). The meme can be attributed to both folklore and the PR campaign of one of K.A. Sobchak's rivals; in this case, the meme may be a shining example of defamation of the opponent. Whereas in the previous example the interaction of picture and text enhanced the ironic effect due to their synonymy, in this case, irony arises from the antithesis of the photo and the verbal component of the meme. The antonymy of the photo and the caption creates the effect of oxymoron, differentiation and opposition. The combination of three stylistic devices at once enhances the ironic effect, is remembered and affects the associative memory, that is, in the future, this picture will automatically appear in the reader's memory, regardless of the image in which the reader sees K.A. Sobchak. Moreover, "polycode" irony is based on silence, belittling, ploke, allusion, hypotyposis, borrowing and correction.

Fig. 5. (Translation: A president one is not ashamed of).

The informing function is less commonly extrapolated to Internet memes from the news or political discourse. In this case, polycode irony can be called exceptional. Polycode irony is unique as it transmits new information rather than play up the already known information. One cannot work out the objective and full picture of the events based on memes. Nevertheless, active users of social networks obtain news from Internet memes and, if interested in a particular event, explore it in greater detail on news websites. This is exemplified by the meme where an odious statement about the Russian economy is presented as a quote by V.V. Putin (Fig. 6). Through this device, the author divests themselves of all responsibility for the content of the meme and the reader is keen to explore the context. Moreover, the aforementioned "polycode" irony features such stylistic devices as acrothesis (destroy – build), allusion (news about new sanctions from the USA),

correction (the photo of Putin laughing intensifies the ironic effect), meiosis (the understatement of the merits of Russian economy) and wit.

Fig. 6. (Translation: In response to the USA threatening to destroy the Russian economy, Putin had a long laugh and said that it would have to be built first).

The function of propaganda of patriotism is commonly embedded in creolized texts of "polycode" irony. Such memes can be usually attributed to the folklore genre which is created chaotically. The plot can be based on either relevant political content or stereotypical situations from Russians' lives. Let us look at Fig. 7 for an example of the latter. This kind of meme can be called plot-based as the meme has an introduction, a climax and a resolution – each stage has a corresponding question, a country's symbol and a schoolchild's reply. In the meme, France and Brazil are represented by their national flags and geographic locations whereas Russia is symbolized by a situation that is unimaginable in any other country. The photo shows a grotesque image of a typical Russian retired woman that reflects ingenuity, courage and the unaging soul of the Russian people. The patriotic effect is enhanced by the schoolchild's reply that non-verbally indicates to the reader that Russia is not simply a place on the map, Russia is in everyone's soul. The stylistic devices that became the basis for "polycode" irony: acrothesis, allusion, anadiplosis, anaphora, antithesis, anticipation, questioning, gemination, hypotyposis, gradation, borrowing, pun, wit, parcellation and aggravation.

Fig. 7. (Translation: "Where is France?" "Here." "Where is Brazil?" "Here." "Where is Russia?" "Here.").

5 Results

Therefore, one can conclude that irony as a part of political discourse exceeds the communication between politicians and becomes a part of the media landscape and Internet communication. Not only members of the opposition but also presidents, prime ministers and other representatives of the ruling party become the objects of irony. "Polycode" irony exemplified in Internet memes through ethnospecific verbal and non-verbal means is a significant political tool and becomes a certain "feedback" from people to the government's actions.

Acknowledgments

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