

**English, Polish, and Russian memes
commenting on COVID-19:
A pragmalinguistic analysis**

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Abstract

Internet memes make it easier to process and accept a difficult situation, they help to deal with stress or doubts and archive societal memories. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the similarities and differences between English, Polish and Russian memes reacting to the reality of the COVID-19 outbreak. The material was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of form (a visual part alone, text alone, or both elements combined), their size (from short to extended), their function (informing, warning, entertaining, soothing etc.), the roles of the main characters (based on an extended Karpman drama triangle model). Attention was also paid to the message, if the elements are culture specific or intercultural. Finally, an attempt was made to reveal the pragmatic functions of memes under investigation, their probable intended message, possible effects on the receiver, and – from a wider perspective – what role they played in the COVID-19 discourse.

Keywords

internet memes, COVID-19, pragmatic functions, Karpman drama triangle

Angielskie, polskie i rosyjskie memy komentujące COVID-19: Analiza pragmalingwistyczna

Abstrakt

Memy internetowe ułatwiają przetworzenie i akceptowanie trudnych sytuacji, pomagają uporać się ze stresem czy wątpliwościami oraz są nośnikami pamięci społeczeństwa. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą analizy podobieństw i różnic między angielskimi, polskimi i rosyjskimi memami, które powstały jako reakcja na pandemiczną rzeczywistość COVID-19. Materiał był analizowany zarówno ilościowo, jak i jakościowo pod względem formy (sam element wizualny, sam tekst lub oba elementy razem), ich wielkości (od krótkiej do rozszerzonej), funkcji (informacyjna, ostrzegawcza, zabawna, kojąca itp.), ról głównych bohaterów (w oparciu o rozszerzony model trójkąta dramatycznego Karpmana). Przeanalizowany został także przekaz: czy elementy są specyficzne kulturowo, czy międzykulturowe. Na koniec podjęto próbę ukazania pragmatycznych funkcji badanych memów, ich prawdopodobnego zamierzonego przekazu, możliwych skutków dla odbiorcy, a także – w szerszej perspektywie – jaką rolę odegrały w dyskursie COVID-19.

Słowa kluczowe

memy internetowe, COVID-19, funkcje pragmatyczne, trójkąt dramatyczny Karpmana

1. Introduction

Internet memes are so popular nowadays that it is hard to imagine life before they became so widespread. They are generated and circulated not exclusively by regular Internet users, but also by companies, advertising agencies, political parties, organisations etc. Their target recipients are not only doomed to passive participation in the act of communication, but can also perform in this process by sending a meme, reacting to or even recreating it. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the nature

of the phenomenon from the pragmatic perspective in the context of the emotionally absorbing and life-threatening circumstances of the Coronavirus Pandemic. The corpus material was excerpted from English, Polish and Russian language websites in order to reveal potential differences in the functioning of memes in the three cultures.

2. Concept of memes

The general theoretical background that lies behind the majority of research into memes refers to Richard Dawkins' observation from 1976 that those little pieces of cultural information behave like viruses. They carry messages, have the ability to reduplicate, and compete with other memes for our attention – the more successful cement their place in culture, the less successful fall into oblivion. The fields of the rivalry may be architecture, literature, rituals, law, music, art etc. (Dawkins 2006: 192). This reflection was criticised primarily for applying Darwinian evolutionary biology to cultural studies; modern explanations treat memes as objective creations of culture, underlying their artistic aspects (Iwanicki 2018: 66).

Successful memes, like a melody pattern, technique of painting, poetic verse, fashionable clothing, when appreciated by the recipients, tend to be repeated, upgraded, modified by the (re)creators. Thus, the successful pieces of cultural information circulate in a society, evolving into new versions or being forgotten after suffering from a decline in interest. We can observe a constant acceleration in such processes due to technological developments, in particular the means of spreading information. It is difficult to imagine a more effective communication channel than the Internet. The velocity of spreading information is incomparable to the older methods, like television, telephone, telegraph etc., so the internet memes form a unique subgroup in this field.

The definition of this notion (*Internet meme*) is derived from the wider meaning (*meme*). The obvious and crucial difference

is that it is a digitalised creation of culture (text, picture, film, sound) and is primarily distributed on the Internet (Kamińska 2011: 61). Such a message is usually spontaneous and can be processed and transferred into a new item (Kołowiecki 2012). They are easily created and recreated from already existing items, so that they can be applied in current affairs discourse, responding to up-to-date events. Being usually loaded with emotions, reacting to issues that engage a certain social group, they become part of the community's memory, connecting the members who share the same values, history and attitudes (Wójcicka 2019: 67). Analysing this aspect from contrastive perspective has great value for discovering the universals and divergences in conceptualisation of emotional states (Rudyk 2022: 270).

A unique feature of the memes under investigation is that it is almost impossible to remove them from the reservoir of a society – they are stored on different websites. While they enjoy high popularity, they are liked, exchanged, transformed and stored on increasing numbers of data carriers. Otherwise cybernauts stop copying and placing them on the net. This does not lead to the deletion of a meme from the Internet, as this is simply impossible, but results in drastic decrease in new appearances. However, it is possible that when a collective memory is formed, a retro comeback is affected, when the Internet users retrieve a meme and return it into the circulation (Wójcicka 2019: 63–114). A good example is *Grumpy Cat* – a series of pictures with subscriptions depicting an annoyed looking cat called Tardar Sauce. First published, the meme went viral, gradually losing attention with time and becoming popular once again when the information of the cat's death spread across the net (Titulaer 2020: 6–7).

Although in most cases the leading function of internet memes is to amuse and entertain the recipients, it is also possible to find educational and informative examples (Naruszewicz-Duchlińska 2017: 251–263). For their proper decoding

both participants of the communication have to share (or at least be aware of) the same values, knowledge and attitudes.

As a rule, memes help to accustom cybernauts to harsh, stressful situations, doubts, or motivate netizens to act. Each such piece of communication has an author, usually a single person (although this also can be a team – as in the case of political memes during election campaigns) and recipients – a potentially unlimited number. Any of the receivers may (and frequently do) react to the message, by liking it, sharing with others or even recreating the meme or creating a response. Making new internet memes has been simplified by some websites, so called *meme generators*, where one can pick a photo and add a text to it (to mention <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator> as just one example). This is supposed to be one of the greatest boosters of the contemporary popularity of memes, alongside open access to the Internet and stressful events experienced by entire nations, like the COVID-19 outbreak (Ryžkov 2021: 19).

The form of an internet meme usually, but not always, consists of a visual part (a picture or a clip) and a text. The two elements may equally exist alone, but it is definitely less common. The text, which is not an obligatory part of a meme, needs to be brief. Just as in most of the internet genres TLTR passages ('too long to read') have little or no chance of gaining the recipients' attention (Nowak 2015: 43). What is more, it is a common strategy to divide the text into two parts, the first catching the addressee's attention, the visual part giving the background for the information or hint for hidden interpretation, the second part being the unexpected punch-line (Kansteiner 2014: 239).

Although making memes is a creative process, some characters from the visual part may gain popularity among creators. Such cyber celebrities are for example *Grumpy Cat*, *the Trollface*, *Philosoraptor*, *Piesel*, *Kote*, *Филологическая дева* [Filologičeskaâ deva] etc. They usually appear in a specific context, making it easier to quickly interpret the entire meme, e.g. if a Philosoraptor appears, the meme will probably contain some so-

called *shower thoughts* i.e. deep thoughts that challenge our standard perceptions.¹

3. Pragmatic background of the survey

Internet memes manifest all the constitutive features of internet discourse. It is a written form of communication, interlocutors are separated physically and temporarily, it can take the form of both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Al-Sa'di and Hamdan 2005). On the other hand the language is usually spontaneous, informal, rarely well edited, can contain typos, acronyms, emoticons etc. (Provine, Spencer and Mandell 2007). Such a complex and multilayered phenomenon requires appropriate linguistic tools for examination. The basic pragmatic assumption, introduced by J. L. Austin and developed by his followers is that by uttering we do something (Austin 1962). This approach, with some implementations, like Searle's understanding of illocutionary force (Searle 1969) and Awdiejew's interpretation of pragmatic functions as the ground for speech acts typology (Awdiejew 1983: 53–88) serves in the present study as the theoretical base.

4. Scope of the study

The material was extracted from English, Polish, and Russian-language websites displaying memes. Only those pertaining to the COVID-19 outbreak in any aspect were collected and analysed. The printed form of presenting the research results restricted the material to text, picture, or text + picture forms, excluding memes that contain a video element. A comparable number of websites were browsed in order to collect similar numbers of examples for all the three languages. Links to

¹ To provide some illustrative examples: *Even when a balloon is half inflated, it is completely full.* / *At one point in your life, you were exactly pi years old.* / *Your first birthday is technically your second birthday.* / *Firefly is the opposite of waterfall.* (<https://parade.com/living/shower-thoughts>).

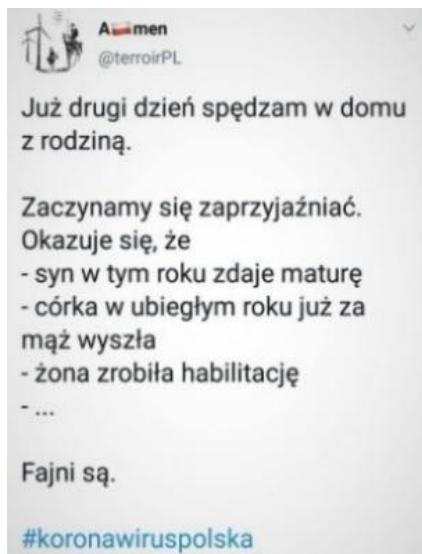
website sources are presented below each Figure. All the pictures are quoted without any changes, in case of Polish and Russian examples I provide my own translation of the texts from the meme in footnotes.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Form and structure of the memes

The structure of memes is simple by definition. From the practical point of view internet communication requires short messages that can be easily noticed, quickly acquired, and immediately reacted to (by liking or sharing with someone). Most of the examples collected for the present survey are a combination of visual part and text – 37, 53 and 44 respectively for English, Polish and Russian material. Less popular are purely textual memes – 7 in English, 4 in Polish and 2 in Russian. Only the two Slavic language sets of memes include a standalone graphic meme – 2 examples in Polish and 4 in Russian.

If a meme consists only of a textual part, it is a short funny thought that does not need the accompaniment of an image which would possibly weaken its gist (Figure 1) or it is an important announcement with a clear message that should be interpreted directly without searching for subtextual nuances (Figure 2). In the second case they usually pass a short hint that can be read in a few seconds – a kind of a reminder, but on rare occasions, it can be also a longer passage of a few paragraphs of highly informative text that passes important information – like those that emerged in the first months of the outbreak, filling the demand for facts and suggested solutions in the chaotic new environment. The speed of sharing internet memes and free access to the websites where they appeared allowed them to spread more successfully than other media sources.

**Figure 1**

<https://demotywatory.pl/4982400/Domowa-kwarantanna>²

**Figure 2**

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1788061-covid-19-pandemic>

² Figure 2: *I'm spending my second day at home with family.*

We are starting to become friends.

It turns out that:

– my son is taking his matura exams this year;

– my daughter got married last year;

– my wife became assistant professor

– ...

They are cool.

In the classic layout of a meme the text is separated by the visual part (Figure 3). Each element has a specific function: the first part of the text introduces the topic, the graphic suggests associations for proper understanding of the meaning, which is usually somehow contrasted with the sense of the words alone or explores their non-obvious associations. The second part of the remark is usually the punchline that shows the author's wit, being the argument, comment or exploration of the language game from the previous elements. There was only one example observed with three text parts (Figure 4), but the formatting (in the top, middle and bottom), combined with an unfortunate choice of colours (white background and letters) makes the meme less effective, though the text itself is witty and has potential.



Figure 3

https://memy.pl/mem/312073/Taka_prawda³



Figure 4

<https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-survival/covid-19-memes/>

If a meme has only one textual part accompanying the visual part, it can go at the top (Figure 5), under the picture or be part of the graphic. In this case, the receiver is left with less information, which requires a more active role in decoding the intended message.

³ Figure 3: *He wasn't able to wash his hands. And he is now no more!*



Figure 5

<https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-survival/covid-19-memes/>

Most demanding for the reader appears to be a meme consisting only of a Figure, as the content must be derived from the picture only (Figure 6). With no other clues for proper decoding, there is a very high chance that it can be misunderstood. In order to avoid such misconception, the creator has to select an unambiguous picture that, when placed in the contemporary context, triggers evident collocations.



Figure 6

https://lenta.ru/news/2016/12/16/grechka_neadekvat/

As in the provided example the form of a gold bar but made of groats symbolises the new wealth in the times of coronavirus caused by the supply shortages that resulted from panic buying. This interpretation is obvious in Russia, but for English and Polish cultures the food product should be exchanged with pasta or rice.

5.2. Roles of the main characters

Roles of the main characters in memes can be analysed in terms of Stephen Karpman's social model of human interaction (1968: 39–43) extended by Constance de Saint Laurent, Vlad P. Glăveanu, and Ioana Literat (2021: 4). One can recognise four personalities: the Victim, the Prosecutor, the Hero and the Fool.⁴ The specific character of COVID-19 memes means that the virus is prosecutor in all examples – be it explicit or implicit.

In most examples collected for the survey, the victims are ordinary people – those who suffer due to the outbreak (the narrator in Figure 7). The prosecutor is usually a family member who misbehaves and threatens their relatives, usually because

⁴ The Victim, the Prosecutor, and the Hero being the original roles proposed by Karpman; the Fool being the extension suggested by de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, and Literat.

the coronavirus situation has affected the person's mental state. Politicians are often presented as prosecutors in memes, usually due to their supposed stupidity or greed. The fools are usually normal citizens who, whether finding themselves in funny situations due to their naivety, or faced with a threat to themselves and/or others because their lack of responsibility or knowledge, fall foul of the virus (the neighbour in Figure 7).

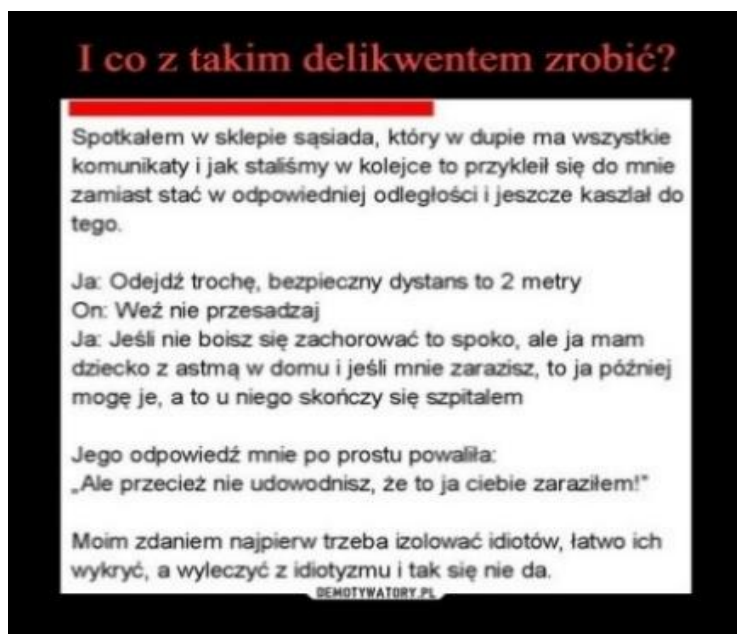


Figure 7

<https://demotywatory.pl/4991349/I-co-z-takim-delikwentem-zrobic>⁵

⁵ Figure 7: *What to do with such a delinquent?*

I met my neighbour in a shop, who doesn't give a shit about all the announcements, and when we were standing in the queue he stuck to me instead of keeping distance and was coughing.

Me: Get back a bit, the safe distance is 2 meters

He: Don't exaggerate

Me: If you're not afraid of becoming ill – OK, but I have a child with asthma at home and if you pass the illness to me, I can pass it to my child, who will end up in hospital

His response bowled me over: But you will not prove I passed the illness to you!

In my opinion such idiots should be isolated: it is easy to detect them, but curing idiocy is impossible.

Finally, the heroes are mostly members of two social groups: health workers risking their lives to protect society, or normal people acting in a responsible way.

It is worth mentioning that in all the three cultures, creators used the same patterns to promote proper behaviour while at the same time discouraging inappropriate conduct, thus the didactic function of memes should be recognised.

5.3. Culture-specific vs. intercultural memes

Most of the memes under investigation follow the same pattern or even use the same elements to pass on information (Figure 2). The internationality is somehow inscribed in the nature of those short emotional pieces of text and Figure, yet, the national elements may give the creation greater power and expressiveness. Pictures of products popular among a specific group, or famous people recognized by the recipients from the same society immediately trigger interest in the meme – just to mention groats in Russia (Figure 6) that plays the same role as rice and pasta in English and Polish, or depicting a historical character – everyone in Russia recognizes Lenin under Vladimir Ilyich (Figure 8),⁶ but for Polish and English speakers some additional context is required.

Modern culture also enables borrowings and interesting fusions. Pictures with the postman from Soviet cartoons⁷ (late 70s and early 80s) and Wendy Torrance (*Shining* 1980) are present in Russian and Polish materials (Figure 9). The mixture of a courier delivering a parcel from China and the terrified protagonist of a horror film creates a humorous amalgam. It is very probable that it originated in Runet as the cartoon was not

⁶ Name and patronymic (as *Vladimir Ilyich* in the example) is a traditional form of address in formal communication in Russia. Some famous historical characters are well recognised there without even mentioning the surname, just to name Alexander Sergeyevich (Pushkin), Joseph Vissarionovich (Stalin) or Valentina Vladimirovna (Tereshkova).

⁷ *Трое из Простоквашино* (1978), *Каникулы в Простоквашино* (1980) and *Зима в Простоквашино* (1984).

particularly popular among Polish viewers and probably not many Internet users from Poland were able to recognise the character and the series. The meme was probably adapted in other cultures because it displays rather unambiguous and up-to-date meaning, thus it happened to bear great creative potential.



Figure 8

<https://m.joyreactor.cc/post/4285605>⁸



Figure 9

<https://spletnik.ru/95466-samy-smeshnye-memy-na-temu-koronavirusa-92612>⁹

⁸ Figure 8: Vladimir Ilyich working remotely.

⁹ Figure 9: Good morning! A parcel.
A parcel from China for you!

Another international point of reference is the Anglo-American miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019) some memes depict one of the scientists from the damaged nuclear plant. The parallel between the difficult situation out of control from mid 1980s and COVID-19 are clear (Figure 10).



Figure 10

<https://cqg.pl/6q8>¹⁰

It emerges that there are definitely more similarities in the excerpted material than differences. Most societies struggled in the same way with the same problems caused by the same virus, so the reaction of internauts was similar in all the three cultures. As far as the differences are concerned, they usually denote culture-specific items or personae, with the Russian language material being the richest in such instances.

5.4. Functions of the memes

Memes present a form of communication, which allows their interpretation in terms of speech act theory (Nita, Setiawan, and Lestari 2021: 469) – to determine their intended communication

¹⁰ Figure 10: *How many cases did you detect in Białystok?*
Zero.
How many people did you test?
Zero.

goals and gauge their impact on the recipients. The pragmatic functions of an utterance play an important role in classifying the leading and supplementary illocutionary forces, defining the most probable meaning(s) and intention(s) of the expression.

The covid-memes collected for the present survey fall into two basic groups: entertaining and informative. The first group falls in line with the leading function of memes in general (Bauckhage 2011: 42) and is much more popular: all examples in English, and almost all in Polish and Russian. In the case of the pandemic, the power of laughter remains invaluable – it relieves stress, gives strength for acting, motivates the audience (Meyer 2000: 312), making it easier to overcome the crisis situation (Figure 1, Figure 4 etc.).

Few examples were crafted with the explicit intention to educate or instruct: two in Polish and one in Russian materials. The main function was to provide reliable, up to date information. This task was particularly important in the first months of the outbreak, when the circumstances were new and societies were insufficiently prepared to face such a challenge (Figure 11).

Pragmatic analysis of the memes helps to understand the intentions of their creators. The examples gathered for the present survey fall into the following speech acts: joke, ridicule, warning, accusation and praise (typology based on Wierzbicka 1987). The main purpose of the first type is to make fun in order to improve the mood of others. The memer usually pretends that the story is true and the audience recognises that this is a harmless game. Compare Figure 3 – a joke that has an implicitly didactic punch-line.

The next act – ridicule – is not an innocent way of making fun. It is based on intentionally deriding somebody for something that the person is content with. The main reason for uttering this act is undermining the target person's good name and presenting them as pompous and self-important. During the coronavirus outbreak government officials usually took the blame in the eyes of the society, as in Figure 10.



Figure 11

https://pikabu.ru/story/o_vazhnosti_karantina_7306781¹¹

If a meme is created in order to warn the readers, it has two major tasks: to draw attention to something bad or dangerous that the recipients are (probably) unaware of, and to steer them in taking appropriate actions. Figure 11 presents a good example of this group.

Accusing memes have a social purpose to inform the audience about negligence of somebody, label that person as dangerous or evil as well as to complain about injustice or harm that the author experienced. As a rule, it calls for action(s). The accused can be recognised and labelled, the wrongdoing can be specified and (ideally) compensated for, society can be given an

¹¹ Figure 11: *Staying at home can save lives.*

COVID-19 is deadly for elderly people. You can live through it easily. But you can break the chain of infections to save the lives of elderly people. healthy/sick/dead.

awareness that would protect its members from such events in the future. Figure 7 contains accusation of wrong behaviour.

Internet memes designed to praise express a positive evaluation of a person or group of people. It can be a direct act – by praising somebody, or indirect – by praising somebody's deeds. The core of this type is expressing judgement with a positive emotive load. As Wierzbicka (1987: 197–199) mentions, [...] *One can hardly praise anything in a cold or even indifferent tone of voice*. Figure 2 highlights a certain social group that managed to face a difficult task in extremely challenging times and holds them up as an example to be followed.

6. Conclusions and implications

It occurs that memers' reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak was very similar in the cultures under investigation, with only slight culture-specific differences. Both form and content followed the same pattern, in many cases the elements exploited in the creation process were drawn from popular meme generator websites. The most significant differences can be found in the use of culture-specific items in the memes, like specific food, current local political issues, or famous characters from national politics, history or arts (e.g. literature, cinematography). One of the main reasons may be the nature of the memes themselves – they circulate on the Internet, are copied, translated or give an idea of how to create a meme with the same functions in a target language. The creators were working in similar circumstances, so their goals and chosen communicative strategies have many features in common between the three materials. It would be a very interesting survey to study examples commenting on a topic that divides given communities.

Pragmatic analysis of internet memes provided the opportunity to recognise the most popular types of speech acts: joke, ridicule, warning, accusation and praise. They all tend to serve two main pragmatic functions: entertaining (vast majority of examples) and informing. The traditional structure of a meme (a

graphic part plus text) happens to have the biggest potential in precise coding of intended meaning and increases the chances of it being decoded according to the assumptions of the sender. The Figure would appear to aid the receiver's path of interpretation in a similar way that facial expression does in face-to-face communication.

Internet memes are one of the forms of group memory, so they store not only facts, but also collect emotions caused by events. Their influence on the internauts is quick and helps establish group bonds, as they are usually circulated on websites of like-minded people, who share the same interests or views. Only topics important for the netizens can enter the group memory and be successfully spread for a certain period of time. The most popular categories in the material gathered for the survey were remote education/work, shopping/receiving parcels and quarantine.

The creators took up the challenge of fighting the virus on an ideological level by informing members of their society or by making fun of the enemy of the state, but this was definitely not a pre-planned or coordinated action. Internet memes are a highly productive, spontaneous and emotional element, which makes them authentic in the opinion of a wide range of netizens.

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