IMPLICIT REFLECTIONS OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IN ARABIC INTERNET MEMES

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The reaction to the news of Russian invasion of Ukraine is expressed in the Arab world through various communicative means, including Internet memes. Language of social media is utilised to convey the non-official public opinion, both explicitly and implicitly. This paper deals with a complex study of the Arabic humorous discourse, in particular Ukraine war memes, involving their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic peculiarities. The research is based on the works of R. Bassiouney [1], M. Bulatovic [2], M. R. Enverga [3], and others. Arabic narratives about the Russian war against Ukraine on social networks have been outlined in the Ukrainian mass media [4]. However, a more in-depth linguistic analysis is necessary to examine the language as a tool affecting the public opinion online.

Memes are often used for the self-identification of in-group members. Meme is an element of culture, mainly a text, an image, a video or a mixed message (contains both verbal and non-verbal components), often of a humorous nature, that can be replicated and spread online and offline [3]. Memes refer to realities easily recognisable in a certain community. They also appear as an effective instrument of manipulation [3], widely utilised in the political propaganda (for instance, to diminish the significance of the political opponents by mocking their program, achievements or even personal traits). In 2016, the described phenomenon was observed in D. Trump’s election campaign on Twitter. Thus, the creation of troll and bot “factories” resulted in the “weaponization” of memes [3].

The investigation materials (nearly 50 posts from the first month of war) were selected from two different Facebook communities. This content reveals mainly implicit references to the war in Ukraine. The direct focus was on the Russian side, the western countries and the NATO, problems of Palestine and Iraq, etc.

Meme 1 [5] demonstrates the admiration of the Russian president as a thoughtful leader juxtaposed to the North Korean ruler. When Kim Chong Un’s “mother” asks Putin, “mumkin a’rif ibnî miš b-yihârib ma’a-kum liḥ” (can I know why my son is not fighting with you?), he replies, “ibnu-k yâ hânim ‘âyiz yaḍrib nowawiy wa yumawwit-nâ koll-nâ” (your son, Hanim, wants to strike nukes and to kill us all). From the linguistic point of view, the colloquial variant of the text has the Egyptian Arabic syntactical (for instance, the interrogative word “liḥ” in the end of the sentence) and
lexical features (“līh” – why, “‘āyiz” – he wants). The meme reflects the informal communication traits, including the simplified variant of “nuclear weapon” – “nawawiy” (the adjective “nuclear” is substantivated, its translation was adapted to the informal English equivalent “nukes”). The code is generally comprehensible for Arabs.

Such admiration, however, can contain implicit signs of fear. For instance, a smiling Putin’s face and a reference to the “cancel culture” (expressed with negation means, such as in the following text in Meme 2 [6]: “al-fťfā: istīb‘ād rūsiyâ min ka‘s al-‘ālam / būtīn: lan yakūna ka‘s al-‘ālam aṣlan” (removal of Russia from the World Cup / Putin: There will be no World Cup at all). The scared reaction is conveyed with an awkward laughter emoji. Fear of the Russian military force is implicitly expressed in Meme 3 [7]. It is composed of the nuclear weapon picture and the following text: “ramdān fi ǧanna inshā‘allā” (Ramadan in heaven, God willing). The humorous effect is achieved through mocking the death as the result of using the deadly nuclear weapon “Satan-2”. MSA was chosen to convey the message with a religious component.

In meme 4 [8], we see the implicit accusation of double standards regarding the western world’s attitude to Russia in comparison to the Arabic countries: “ţazawnā al-‘irāq li-annā ‘inda-hā nawawiy / ya’nī b-taḥaqqamūn ‘alā rūsiyā? / enta mağnum? rūsiyā ‘inda-hā nawawiy” (We invaded Iraq because it had nukes [nuclear weapons] / so are you attacking Russia? / Are you crazy? Russia has nukes). Although the code choice is non-standard, it is unclear which Arabic variety is utilised in particular. However, the given text is understandable in the whole Arabic speaking region. Another shift example is appealing to the Palestinian problem. Meme 5 was produced in English to reach the audience beyond the Arab world [9]: “Ignore Ukraine the way they ignored Palestine”. Diminishing of Ukraine’s role as an independent power at the political scene is explicit – “Ukraine” is typed from the small letter in the meme.

The textual part is as important as iconic or video components, since the non-verbal element convey additional meanings and reinforce the emotional effect on the recipients. The analysed material contained video clips and screen shots from online games, TV series, news, and edited pictures, involving inserted faces of world leaders, different flags and so forth. Non-verbal components created the humorous effect, attracted the attention, put the focus on particular symbols (for instance, Ukrainian and Palestinian flags inserted into a picture create a visual opposition between two cases).

In the studied memes, the code choice is related to the aim of increasing the number of followers supporting particular ideas about the war in Ukraine. The humorous identity must be linguistically comprehensible for an average online user. The linguistic analysis indicated to the usage of different colloquial variants, involving Egyptian Arabic and other Mashriq varieties. However, these codes can be understood throughout the Arab world. The frequently used slang word “nawawiy” (nukes) is widely recognized among Facebook users. Memes in English were registered as well. MSA is used less than the informal language and, in addition, it can reflect the simplified writing (omitted ḥamza, letter ha‘ instead of to-marbūta, etc.), the insertion of frequently used spoken lexemes (“bass” – only / but, “innū” –
that, etc.). It shows the desire to imitate the real-life speech and, thus, to be close to the recipients and to have an impact on their behaviour, both online and offline.

This investigation showed that Arabic memes posted on Facebook in the end of February – March 2022 were utilized to express the following attitudes to the Ukraine-Russia war: admiration of the Russian president; admiration and fear of the Russian president's power; fear of the nuclear weapons; mocking the western countries' attitude toward Russia as juxtaposed to Iraq; comparing the western and the Arabic cultures; shifting from the topic of war in Ukraine to the problem of Palestine, and other. The majority of the studied memes did not mention the word “war”, the explicit discussion of Ukraine itself was avoided as well. Since memes serve as a means of attracting followers and spreading ideas, not only they can express the existing opinion, but shape the way online users view the situation. For instance, they can distract the attention and, thus, diminish the gravity of war in Ukraine. The further investigation of manipulation language mechanisms will enable understanding of methods in which propaganda affects the public opinion through the social media.

References: