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TRANSFORMATION OF LANGUAGE NORMS IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT (BASED ON INTERNET MEMES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS)

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Abstract
The rapid development of digital technologies and social networking platforms has significantly transformed contemporary communication practices and influenced the functioning of language norms. Social media, online discussions, and internet memes have created new forms of linguistic interaction characterized by informality, brevity, multimodality, intertextuality, and the rapid circulation of linguistic innovations. These processes affect spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and pragmatic conventions. The present article examines the transformation of language norms in the digital environment, focusing particularly on internet memes and social networks as spaces where new linguistic forms emerge, spread, and become socially recognizable. Special attention is given to abbreviations, anglicisms, code-switching, expressive punctuation, emojis, hashtags, colloquial constructions, and semantic shifts. The article also discusses the relationship between linguistic innovation and traditional standards, emphasizing that deviations from formal language conventions should not automatically be interpreted as linguistic errors. Their communicative function depends on context, audience, genre, and purpose. The study employs a theoretical and descriptive approach based on research in internet linguistics, computer-mediated communication, and digital culture. It concludes that digital communication does not simply destroy established language norms; rather, it contributes to their adaptation and diversification.

Keywords: Language norms, digital communication, internet memes, social networks, linguistic innovation, internet linguistics, computer-mediated discourse, language variation, digital literacy.

Introduction

The development of information and communication technologies has changed not only the ways people exchange information but also the linguistic forms through which communication takes place. Social networking platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and X have become important spaces for everyday interaction, public discussion, entertainment, education, and the construction of social identity. Millions of users produce and share texts, images, videos, comments, and other multimodal messages daily. As a result, language is increasingly used in environments where communication is rapid, interactive, and frequently informal.

Traditional language norms have historically been associated with established rules of spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and stylistic appropriateness. These norms remain essential in academic writing, official documents, education, and professional communication. However, digital communication has introduced additional conventions that are not always consistent with formal written standards. Users shorten words, omit punctuation marks, combine languages, employ unconventional spelling, and use emojis or visual symbols to express emotions and attitudes.

Internet memes represent a particularly interesting example of these developments. A meme may combine an image, a short verbal message, a recognizable cultural reference, and an element of irony or humour. Its meaning often depends on shared knowledge and the ability of users to recognize the original context. Through repetition and modification, memes can introduce new expressions, transform existing words, and influence the vocabulary of online communities.

The transformation of language norms in digital communication is therefore an important subject for contemporary linguistics. It raises questions about the boundaries between standard and non-standard language, the relationship between written and spoken communication, and the influence of digital culture on linguistic development.

The purpose of this article is to examine the major ways in which language norms are transformed in the digital environment, particularly through internet memes and social networking platforms. It also aims to identify the linguistic and pragmatic functions of these transformations and to consider their implications for Russian language teaching and digital literacy.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Language Norms in Digital Communication

Language norms represent socially established conventions governing the use of linguistic units in a particular language community. They include orthographic, grammatical, lexical, phonetic, and stylistic rules. Standard language norms provide a common framework that facilitates communication among speakers from different social, geographical, and educational backgrounds.

Nevertheless, language is not a static system. It develops in response to social, cultural, technological, and historical changes. New words appear, existing expressions acquire additional meanings, and certain grammatical or stylistic patterns become more common. Therefore, linguistic norms should be understood as relatively stable but historically changing conventions.

Digital communication has accelerated these processes. Crystal (2006) emphasizes the significance of the internet as a communicative environment that combines characteristics of speech and writing. Online messages are often written but possess features traditionally associated with spoken interaction, including spontaneity, emotional expression, informality, and direct audience engagement.

Herring (2004), in her research on computer-mediated discourse analysis, demonstrates the importance of examining linguistic structures together with the technological and social conditions in which communication occurs. Digital discourse cannot be fully understood

through grammatical analysis alone because the platform, communication format, participants, and interactional purposes also influence linguistic choices.

One important characteristic of digital communication is its dependence on context. The same linguistic form may be acceptable in a social media comment but inappropriate in an academic article or official letter. Consequently, the transformation of language norms should be analyzed in relation to communicative situations rather than evaluated exclusively through traditional grammatical standards.

Digital communication thus contributes to the development of additional conventions. These conventions may initially appear unconventional, but repeated use can make them recognizable and meaningful within particular online communities.

2. Social Networks as Spaces of Linguistic Transformation

Social networking platforms provide conditions for the rapid creation and circulation of linguistic innovations. Unlike traditional printed media, social networks allow users to produce, distribute, comment on, and modify content almost simultaneously.

Several characteristics of social networks influence language use.

First, digital communication is characterized by speed. Users often compose messages quickly and prioritize the immediate transmission of meaning. This encourages abbreviations, simplified sentence structures, omitted punctuation, and informal vocabulary.

Second, online communication is interactive. Users respond to comments, quote previous messages, use hashtags, and participate in discussions. Linguistic forms are therefore shaped not only by individual preferences but also by the reactions of other participants.

Third, digital platforms encourage multimodality. A message may combine written language with photographs, videos, emojis, animated images, and audio. Meaning is consequently constructed through the interaction of verbal and non-verbal elements.

Fourth, social networks facilitate the circulation of language across geographical and cultural boundaries. Expressions originating in one linguistic community may quickly become recognizable in another. This process encourages borrowing, code-switching, and the development of hybrid forms.

For example, contemporary Russian-language digital communication frequently incorporates English words and expressions such as лайк, пост, сторис, стрим, репост, and хайп. Some of these borrowings have become established elements of everyday vocabulary, while others remain closely connected with particular online practices.

The use of such expressions demonstrates that digital communication is not merely a channel for transmitting existing language forms. It is also an environment in which lexical and stylistic innovations emerge and circulate.

3. Internet Memes as Linguistic and Cultural Phenomena

Internet memes are among the most recognizable forms of digital communication. They generally consist of images, short texts, visual templates, or combinations of these elements that are repeatedly shared and modified by internet users.

Shifman (2014) considers internet memes an important phenomenon of digital culture and emphasizes their role in participatory communication. Memes are not simply copied messages. They are frequently adapted, transformed, and reinterpreted by different users.

From a linguistic perspective, memes possess several distinctive characteristics.

Intertextuality. Many memes refer to popular films, television programmes, public events, political statements, or other widely recognized cultural materials. Their meaning depends on the audience's ability to identify these references.

Brevity. Memes usually contain short verbal messages. Their effectiveness depends on the ability to communicate an idea through a limited number of words.

Expressiveness. Humour, irony, exaggeration, sarcasm, and emotional evaluation are frequently used to attract attention and establish a relationship with the audience.

Reproducibility. A meme can be copied and modified by numerous users. During this process, its wording, visual elements, and communicative purpose may change.

Context dependence. The interpretation of a meme often requires knowledge of the event, person, cultural reference, or online discussion to which it relates.

Milner (2016) describes participatory digital culture as an environment in which users actively create and circulate cultural meanings. This perspective is particularly relevant to memes because their production is distributed among ordinary internet users rather than restricted to professional media organizations.

Memes can also influence everyday vocabulary. Repeated verbal patterns may become recognizable expressions, while certain phrases may acquire meanings that differ from their original contexts. Thus, memes contribute to the creation and circulation of new linguistic conventions.

4. Major Forms of Language Norm Transformation in the Digital Environment

The influence of social networks and internet memes can be observed at different linguistic levels.

4.1. Changes in spelling and punctuation

One of the most visible characteristics of online writing is the flexible use of spelling and punctuation. Users may omit punctuation marks, repeat letters, use capital letters for emphasis, or intentionally write words in unconventional forms.

For example, repeated letters in expressions such as ну ооочень хорошо may indicate emotional intensity. Similarly, writing a whole message in capital letters can express strong feelings, insistence, or shouting.

The repetition of question marks and exclamation marks, as in Чтооо??? or Невероятно!!!, also functions as a means of conveying emotional meaning.

These forms are generally unsuitable for formal academic and official texts. However, in informal digital communication, they can serve important pragmatic functions.

4.2. Abbreviations and shortened forms

The need for rapid communication has encouraged the use of abbreviations and shortened expressions. Russian-language digital communication includes forms such as спс (спасибо), пж (пожалуйста), имхо (по моему скромному мнению), and лол (from English LOL).

Some abbreviations are used mainly in informal conversations, while others become recognizable across wider online communities.

Abbreviation is not a completely new linguistic phenomenon. It has existed in written communication for centuries. However, digital platforms have increased its frequency and expanded its social functions.

4.3. Borrowings and anglicisms

English has a significant influence on the vocabulary of digital communication. This influence is particularly visible in technological terminology, entertainment, marketing, and online interaction.

Examples include лайк, репост, сторис, стрим, блогер, челлендж, and контент. These words are often adapted to Russian pronunciation and grammatical patterns.

The borrowing process may involve morphological adaptation. For example, English-derived nouns can form Russian verbs and participial forms, such as лайкать, залайкать, or запостить. Such forms demonstrate the ability of Russian morphology to incorporate foreign lexical material.

However, the use of anglicisms depends on the communicative situation. In some contexts, a borrowed word may be more concise or internationally recognizable; in others, an established Russian equivalent may be more appropriate.

4.4. Code-switching and hybrid expressions

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation or message. It is common in multilingual online communities where users have different linguistic backgrounds.

For instance, a Russian-language post may contain English phrases such as good morning, stay positive, or no comments. Sometimes users combine English lexical elements with Russian grammatical structures.

Such expressions may indicate social identity, educational background, professional affiliation, or participation in global digital culture.

Code-switching should not automatically be regarded as a sign of insufficient language competence. In multilingual communication, it may represent a deliberate stylistic and pragmatic choice.

4.5. Emojis, hashtags, and visual symbols

Emojis have become an important component of digital communication. They can express emotions, indicate attitudes, strengthen evaluations, and clarify the intended tone of a message. For example, a smiling emoji may communicate friendliness, while a laughing emoji can indicate amusement or irony. The interpretation of these symbols, however, depends on context and shared conventions.

Hashtags also perform several functions. They organize information, identify topics, connect users with similar interests, and create thematic communities. In some cases, hashtags become part of the message itself and contribute to its rhetorical effect.

The increasing use of visual symbols demonstrates that digital communication is not limited to conventional written language. Instead, it involves a multimodal system in which words, images, and symbols interact.

4.6. Semantic transformation and the emergence of new meanings

Digital communication can change the meanings of familiar words and expressions. Certain words acquire additional meanings through repeated use in online communities.

For example, the Russian word токсичный is widely used not only in its literal or scientific sense but also to describe negative interpersonal behaviour and communication. The expression вирусный контент refers to digital material that spreads rapidly among users, while залететь в рекомендации describes the unexpected or successful appearance of content in recommendation systems.

These examples demonstrate how technological and social developments influence semantic change.

5. Language Norms and Linguistic Innovation: A Question of Context

The transformation of language norms in digital communication should not be interpreted as the complete disappearance of standard language. Rather, it reflects the coexistence of different linguistic registers and communicative conventions.

A distinction should be made between intentional stylistic variation and unintentional language mistakes. For example, omitting punctuation in a short informal message may be a deliberate choice associated with speed and conversational style. The same omission in a research article may represent a violation of established academic conventions.

Therefore, linguistic appropriateness depends on several factors:

the purpose of communication;
the relationship between participants;
the communication platform;
the intended audience;
the genre and level of formality;
the cultural and social context.

Digital users often move between different registers. The same person may use informal abbreviations in a private conversation, standard language in an academic assignment, and professional terminology in a workplace discussion.

This ability to select appropriate linguistic forms is an important aspect of communicative competence. Consequently, digital communication should be studied not only as a source of linguistic deviations but also as an environment in which users develop new forms of stylistic flexibility.

6. A Methodological Framework for Analyzing Internet Memes and Social Media Texts

The linguistic analysis of internet memes and social media messages requires an interdisciplinary approach combining linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives.

A practical analytical framework may include five stages.

Stage 1. Selection of digital material. Researchers select memes, posts, comments, or discussions from publicly accessible online sources. The material should be relevant to the research question and sufficiently varied.

Stage 2. Identification of linguistic features. The researcher examines vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, grammar, abbreviations, borrowed words, and other linguistic characteristics.

Stage 3. Pragmatic analysis. Attention is given to the communicative purpose of the message, including humour, irony, criticism, persuasion, emotional expression, and identity construction.

Stage 4. Cultural and contextual interpretation. The researcher identifies cultural references, shared knowledge, social values, and background information necessary for understanding the message.

Stage 5. Evaluation of linguistic innovation. The researcher determines whether a particular form represents a temporary stylistic choice, a community-specific convention, or a potentially more widely accepted linguistic innovation.

This framework makes it possible to examine digital language systematically without treating every unconventional expression as an error.

Researchers should also consider ethical issues. Public availability does not always mean that personal information can be reproduced without restrictions. Usernames, photographs, private messages, and other identifying details should be handled responsibly. Where necessary, examples should be anonymized and platform policies should be respected.

7. Educational Implications for Russian Language Teaching

The transformation of language norms in digital communication has important implications for language education. Modern students encounter a considerable amount of information through social networks, video platforms, online discussions, and digital entertainment. Therefore, language teaching should help learners understand both standard language conventions and the linguistic characteristics of online communication.

Internet memes and social media texts can be used as supplementary educational materials. Their inclusion in lessons may increase student engagement and provide opportunities for contextual language analysis.

Several activities can be particularly effective.

First, students can compare a social media post with its formal written version. This task helps them identify differences in vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and style.

Second, learners can analyze memes and explain the relationship between verbal and visual components. Such activities develop interpretation skills and cultural awareness.

Third, students can identify anglicisms and propose appropriate Russian equivalents. This exercise strengthens vocabulary knowledge and encourages reflection on borrowing processes.

Fourth, learners can rewrite informal digital messages using standard written language. This activity develops the ability to adapt linguistic forms to different communicative situations.

Finally, students can discuss whether a particular expression represents a mistake, a stylistic innovation, or a community-specific convention. Such discussions promote critical thinking and linguistic awareness.

The educational objective should not be to prohibit digital language forms. Instead, students should learn when and why particular forms are appropriate. They need to understand that effective communication requires both knowledge of standard language and the ability to interpret different registers.

8. Challenges and Prospects of Digital Language Development

Although digital communication creates opportunities for linguistic creativity, it also presents several challenges.

One major challenge is the spread of misleading information. Short messages and emotionally expressive memes can circulate without sufficient verification of their content. As a result, users may accept inaccurate information or misunderstand the original context.

Another challenge concerns the simplification of written communication. Frequent exposure to informal digital language may influence students' writing habits, particularly when they do not clearly distinguish between conversational and academic registers.

The rapid circulation of new expressions also makes linguistic research more complex. Some innovations disappear quickly, while others become established in everyday language. Researchers therefore need to consider the time, platform, and social group in which a particular expression is used.

In addition, digital communication raises questions about privacy, copyright, cyberbullying, and responsible online behaviour. These issues demonstrate that digital literacy should include not only linguistic knowledge but also ethical and critical awareness.

Nevertheless, digital platforms provide valuable opportunities for linguistic research. They allow scholars to observe language use in natural communicative environments and investigate how new expressions spread among different communities.

Conclusion

The transformation of language norms in the digital environment is a complex and continuing process influenced by technological development, social interaction, and cultural exchange. Social networks and internet memes have become important spaces for the emergence and circulation of linguistic innovations.

The analysis demonstrates that digital communication affects different levels of language, including spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. Abbreviations, anglicisms, code-switching, emojis, hashtags, and unconventional writing patterns are among the most visible features of this transformation.

Internet memes play a particularly significant role because they combine verbal and visual elements, rely on intertextual references, and encourage users to reproduce and modify linguistic forms. Through repeated circulation, some expressions become recognizable conventions within online communities and may eventually influence everyday language.

At the same time, the development of digital language does not necessarily mean the disappearance of traditional linguistic standards. Formal and informal registers continue to coexist, and their appropriate use depends on communicative purpose, audience, and context. Therefore, the ability to distinguish between standard language requirements and digital

communication conventions is an essential component of contemporary communicative competence.

In language education, internet memes and social media texts can serve as effective materials for developing linguistic awareness, critical thinking, cultural interpretation, and digital literacy. Rather than rejecting online linguistic innovations, educators should help learners understand their functions and use language appropriately in different situations.

Ultimately, the digital environment should be viewed not as a threat to language but as a dynamic space in which linguistic norms are negotiated, adapted, and continuously developed.

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