Case Study

The Case of Language Media Content (Memes) of the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic period gave rise to numerous memes in response to online audiences. In this article, the authors analyze the corpus of memes of Italian and Russian language media content during the 2020 pandemic from the perspective of a sociolinguistic approach, identifying the most significant groups of memes-markers as a response to the network audience involvement. The authors point out the ability to spread and maintain a stable form as an important component of these memes, as well as the emotional and phatic functions of a meme in the sociocultural space of the Internet community in Italy and Russia. Emerging in the media space and reproduced through reposting, memes have become a sociocultural phenomenon and can manage information flows. Besides, thanks to the halo of mass coverage, entertaining character, and affinity to the emotions of the addressee, the meme reflects the opinion of many users and does not need the category of authorship. It makes no difference whether a meme is a picture or has only a verbal component, and it is essential to be recognized in any of the many variations. At the same time, if the created meme has gained popularity and has become entrenched in the virtual environment, it can later form a way of realizing urgent needs or suppressing some trends while strengthening others.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in society greatly impact the development of the media sphere, including media content (Villi & Noguera-Vivo, 2017). There are new audience requirements

for the presentation of information, which causes natural changes in forming a common sociocultural and media space (Waddock, 2015). In the modern internet space, where a person acts not only as a consumer of media events but also as their creator, the structural qualities of communication are reflected through a text and visual message, containing most of the expression—memes. The primary factor in the rise and popularization of memes, not only as a resource but also as a reflection of mentality and culture in the studied period, is optimization and simplification of the expression of meaning using text, visual and auditory components, with a focus on the maximum realization of the actual needs of the society. If a meme is just neutral information in everyday life, its role became unexpectedly important in socio-political and cultural life. Memes have become a way to influence people's moods, sympathies, lives, and choices. Memes may compete, may or may not pass their natural selection, and may be transmitted quickly or slowly, depending on the difficulty of assimilation and the availability of suitable carriers nearby. They can be grouped into "memplexes"—doctrines, religions, ideologies, conspiracy theories, and much more.

The modern era of research in the philological sphere is generally associated with an increased interest in comparative analysis of different languages, pointing out the similarities and differences on various levels, thus making observations concerning the languages and the cultural peculiarities. We analyze the Italian and Russian data because the COVID-19 crisis and its ensuing periods of confinement have generated high levels of social stress. Italy was the first European country where the coronavirus spread wildly and later spread to Russia. Social networks became the space that brought people together, and memes were the type of message most shared. The present article analyzes the collected corpus of memes of our home country (Russia) with those of Italy during the 2020 pandemic and responds to why some memes become popular and some are long-lasting. What historical characters/media personalities/politicians gave rise to many memes, and what is the reason for this? Can a good meme overcome local boundaries? Do memes always appear spontaneously, or are memes introduced intentionally? Is it reasonable that a meme can be identified with a cultural universal and be the main broadcaster of society and culture? To answer the questions, the authors analyzed the whole corpus of memes that appeared on the network during the 2020 pandemic: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook (Italy and Russia), MySpace (Italy), Telegram, vk.com, and ok.ru (Russia).

For this research, we chose a sociolinguistic approach with elements of semiotics. Thanks to the first one, we concentrate on verbal and non-verbal communication phenomena. In contrast, the second one helps analyze how a sign transforms into a meme and is used for specific purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This article defines a meme as an information complex filled with expression that shapes the social environment and is transmitted mainly through social media. Suppose the content of a meme expresses an exaggerated emotional reaction in a certain life situation specific to a particular group, and the recipient belongs to this group. In that case, later, it is highly likely that in a similar situation, this pattern is reproduced, or the interlocutors focus on the memory of the viewed meme and have the desire to reproduce it. The main difference between a meme and other ways of representing information on the Internet is playing with a mass character's effect, emphasizing the globality of a process (with its subsequent positive or negative assessment) and indicating one belongs to something.

The concept of "meme" was introduced by Dawkins (1976) in the book "The Selfish Gene" and means a unit of storage and dissemination of cultural information that is transmitted from one individual to another while comparing the processes of evolution of culture and biological evolution. According to the author, when transmitting cultural information, the meme acts like a gene transmitting genetic information; that is, a meme is a living reproducible structure (replicator). Similar to how genes are localized in chromosomes, memes form complexes—meme complexes, memeplexes (memeplex from meme + complex) as examples of

which are usually cited in religious or political doctrines (Dennett, 2007).

Developing the idea of memes as replicator genes, Blackmore (2000) transfers them into the cultural sphere and moves away from understanding the meme as an idea, defining a meme as something that is imitated or as information copied from person to person and influencing the culture and activities of people. Following the gene and meme, Blackmore (2000) singles out a *technomeme*, or a *teme*, for the storage and distribution of which digital devices are responsible.

Applying the concept of "meme" to the information environment, the media researcher Rushkoff (1996) defined memes as *media viruses*, memes, and meme complexes spreading across the infosphere, changing the perception of local and global events. In other words, recently, the "viral" distribution model has been gaining in popularity (Tiron, 2007), according to which memes have the status of media viruses operating in the information environment and significantly impacting users' minds and implying (following the concept of memetics) that memes, through the principles of replication and imitation, contribute to the spread of culture or subculture and ideas implanted in society (Denisova, 2019). Nowotny and Reidy (2022), indeed, speak about "digitality culture" and propose the concept of "Memesis." According to Pettis (2022), memes serve as historical artifacts and can be understood as a form of folklore.

METHODOLOGY

The concept of a meme is multifaceted and allows for many interpretations, as evidenced by the works of modern scientists who comprehensively study memes from the standpoint of two or more approaches. The most studied is the sociolinguistic and linguopragmatic aspects. The modern paradigm for the study of memes is an integral paradigm, which involves using complex methods and techniques for analyzing a wide range of memes affecting almost all aspects of society's everyday life. Most works are devoted to the analysis of memes on (1) political topics (Dynel & Poppi, 2020), (2) memes as a manifestation of people's reaction to certain political events, (3) memes as an attempt to comprehend the present and rethink the past (Kalkina, 2020), and (4) memes as a tool of political struggle (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). Kassing (2020) studies the corpus of memes on (1) sports rivalry, (2) reflecting the fans' attempts to support their favorite players, (3) demoralize the opponent, and (4) demonstrate their belonging to a particular club. The interest of scientists in memes also confirms the importance and relevance of research in this area as a focus of reflection on precedent phenomena in medicine, psychology, ecology, and marketing. In this context, the most prominent are ecologists and eco-activists who use standard meme patterns to use irony and sarcasm to direct public attention to serious environmental issues and climate change (Ross & Rivers, 2019). In the business community, the meme becomes a marketing and strategic tool for the company, with the help of which public interest is aroused by replacing an advertising poster or a poster with memes with provocative and contradictory content (Skjulstad, 2020). Government institutions (for example, the police in Australia) use memes on social networks to create a certain image among the population (Wood, 2020). In medicine, British scientists use memes on depression in diagnosing and treating depressive conditions, studying the reaction of patients and their perception of memes (Akram et al., 2020). Psychologists in the United States are researching memes that campaign for or against vaccination. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content, reactions, and comments to memes allow the development of a communication strategy to inform the population and debunk myths about the risks of vaccination (Harvey, 2019).

With all the variety of approaches to analyzing Internet memes, researchers most often apply the above-stated ones because they accurately reflect the specifics of the Internet meme phenomenon in communication (Ballesteros, 2016). Indeed, the main characteristic of a meme is (1) informational content, (2) the ability to quickly spread from person to person, (3) a stable form with an unstable meaning, and (4) a connection with a specific audience, for which it serves as a way of expressing emotions. Accordingly, further in the article, we define the Internet meme and focus on reflecting social and cultural space, a sign with a stable form that contains a changing concept.

This subject matter is explored using a qualitative methodology and ethnographic fieldwork from the perspective of a sociolinguistic approach, and the memes are categorized to reveal fears, concerns, and experiences during the Coronavirus crisis. For this research, we chose the sociolinguistic approach with elements of semiotics because, thanks to the first one, we concentrate on communication phenomena expressed verbally and non-verbally, while the second one helps to analyze the way a sign transforms into a meme and is used for specific purposes. After Cannizzaro (2016) and her research on semiotics developments (Brier, 2008; Hoffmeyer, 2008; Lotman, 2001), we consider information as a relational entity and internet memes as sign systems.

The popularity of certain memes, their further modifications, and their lasting use also signify the relevance of the meme for our research, as well as the fact that apart from merely making fun of the events, memes start developing acute political senses. In the analyzed corpus of memes of the Italian and Russian language media content during the pandemic, we have identified the most significant groups of marker memes that reflect the brightest response of the network audience.

RESULTS

Due to the intensive technological development of the modern world, communication has often begun to be determined by the properties of the message carrier. Having appeared in the process of self-organization of communication in social networks, first, memes are a product created by Internet users themselves (van Dijck, 2009), who satisfy their internal needs by producing and spreading memes and achieve the desired reaction from the interlocutor with the help of a meme. In social networks, the meme becomes the main marker of users' wide involvement in any process. Therefore, memes can be deemed the main way to transmit information on social networks or represent various groups' opinions about political and social problems. The events of 2020 became a fertile field for the emergence of a huge number of memes, while the study suggests that, despite the universality of the COVID-19 pandemic, national culture finds its manifestation in memes and determines the attitude of citizens to the situation.

This paper explores a corpus of static online memes compiled in Italy and Russia from January to December 2020, during COVID-19 using memes disseminated via Instagram, Twitter, Facebook (Italy and Russia), MySpace (Italy), Telegram, and vk.com, ok.ru (Russia). A corpus of 730 memes that have flooded social networks is thoroughly categorized and analyzed. Striving for clarity in the results, we deliberately chose the most popular items (with the most reactions, comments, and likes) on COVID-19 in equal proportions for both languages (365 each):

1. Italy: 66% of the collected corpus memes were taken from Instagram and Facebook (34% and 32%, respectively) and 34% from Twitter

and MySpace (20% and 14%, respectively) (Figure 1).

2. Russia: Almost half of all the collected corpus memes were taken from vk.com (25%) and Facebook (24%). The sources of 29% of all the memes were Instagram and ok.ru (17% and 12%, respectively), and one fifth came from Telegram (12%) and Twitter (8%). (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Italian memes sources diagram

Figure 2. Russian memes sources diagram

Selection criteria for corpus:

1. Linked to the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Geographical context: Italy and Russia.
3. Humorous nature.
4. If the memes are only visual, they must contain elements or characters from Italian and Russian culture.
5. Understandable to the wider public (without slang, sociolect, or regional realia).

Namely, in the analyzed corpus of memes of the Italian and Russian language media content during the pandemic, we have identified the most significant groups of marker memes that reflect the brightest response of the network audience.

Rush Demand for Essential Goods

From late February to early March 2020, Italy and Russia began introducing quarantine measures concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. People began to massively stock up on essential goods (such as cereals, pasta, toilet paper, canned food, and sanitizers), which was a background for some statements. For example, in the Russian media, there was a statement by the head of the regional department for the food, processing, pharmaceutical industry, and biotechnology Bolshakov: "During the pandemic, most families created annual supplies of buckwheat and toilet paper" (Bolshakov, 2020). As a result of this situation, one of the most popular memes that can be found on Russian social networks has become a marker of wide user engagement: One gentleman asks the
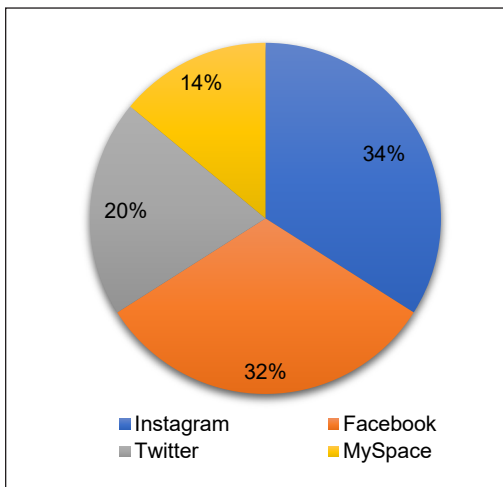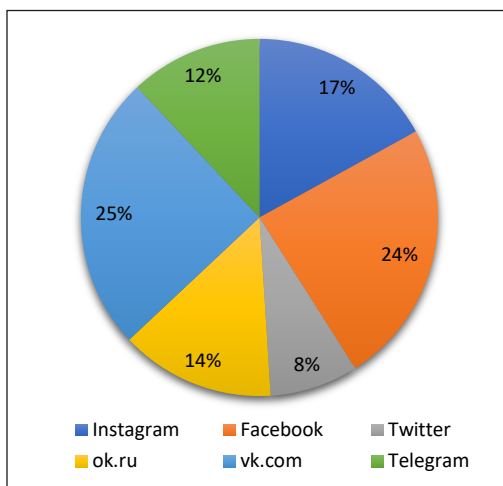
other what securities are worth investing in, to which the other replies that the most valuable security is a three-layer Zewa toilet paper.

There was a meme in Italian with empty counters with only two types of the least popular pasta and an inscription that the "Coronavirus taught us two things: People are stupid, and farfalle and penne are disgusting." Other examples were "The main victim of the virus is penne" and "Penne accuses Italians of bullying."

Another popular product in the analyzed period was hand sanitizer. Russians and Italians started buying antiseptics in pharmacies, stores, and online platforms. In the wake of the pandemic, the antiseptic has become one of the main meme characters on the Internet. Pictures of characters from world-famous films started appearing on the Russian Internet, looking eagerly at the sanitizer with the inscriptions: "My treasure" and "This is the best gift." On the Italian network, memes often announce the readiness to exchange a new car or iPhone 11 for an antiseptic.

Distance Learning

One of the most common memes on this topic was the meme about the mother who invented a vaccine after several days of self-isolation with children.

Through memes, Italians and Russians showed irony about teachers' unpreparedness for online learning. For example, the most popular memes were in Italian, where the teacher asks the students how to turn up the volume, and they kindly

prompt him to a combination that blocks the teacher or closes his or her online conference window on his or her screen. In both languages, some memes mimic the images of classmates during online learning. As a rule, these are images of cartoon characters and animals with funny faces/muzzles. Many memes were devoted to the tricks that schoolchildren resort to not to answer the teacher's question or to explain the lack of homework: You can freeze as if the computer is frozen or pretend there are Internet problems.

In the Russian network, during distance learning, we note many memes that played up the realities of the Russian school, such as fundraising for the class's needs and parents' reproaches to teachers about their professional unsuitability. In some memes, parents request that the school cover the cost of repairs to their child's room since they have been studying from home. In response, teachers laugh good-naturedly at the parents, who may now realize that their child's academic struggles are not solely the teacher's fault. In other memes, family members in underwear appear on camera during online classes for physical activities or handicrafts at home.

However, the most vivid response in the network in the format of memes relates to the topic of the final exams in Russia (Basic State Examination and Unified State Examination), *maturità* in Italy, and the statement of the Minister of Education Lucia Azzolina that students who lagged can be left for the second year (Zunino, 2020). In Italy, the matriculation examination was

conducted in an abbreviated form (oral part only). In Russia in 2020, the Basic State Examination was not held, and the Unified State Examination was postponed to a later date. This situation of anxious expectation and joy or grief is widely reflected in memes in Russian and Italian. At the same time, we can classify such memes as instant memes, quickly losing their relevance. Commenting on the news with memes is not a common practice but rather an emotional reaction or an attempt to provoke one.

Remote Work

For many people, remote work has become a real challenge. In the analyzed media content of the pandemic period on the Italian and Russian-speaking Internet, there were quite a few variants of a meme on the appearance of an employee working remotely: If the computer camera is turned on, formal clothing is typically worn above the belt, and informal clothing is worn below the belt. Another meme related to the peculiarities of remote work without a camera shows us avatars with images of animals and the caption: "Me and my colleagues in work chats for the coming weeks." Several memes depicted how certain professions, like pathologists, rescuers, and archaeologists, would look while working from home.

In Russian social networks, a meme has gained popularity with the image of a scene from the well-known film "The Diamond Arm" and the famous phrase in which one word was replaced: "And you know, I wouldn't be surprised if tomorrow it turns out that your husband is secretly attending work!" In Italian social networks, in turn, there was a meme with a scene from the film "Finding Neverland," where Johnny Depp is sitting on a bench with a boy, smiling sympathetically at him and saying that he will have time to rest on lockdown, to which the boy responds with tears in his eyes that he is from the IT department.

A meme on parents working remotely could depict them resorting to extreme measures like taping their children to the floor or wall. The meme would highlight the challenges of working from home, such as conflicts with family members or the need to attend to young children constantly.

Pets

In Italy and Russia, during the period of the most severe quarantine, people were allowed to go outside to walk their dogs. The trend of tired animal memes emerged, featuring animals being taken for walks by all household members. Some people even walked their toy animals, like hamsters and fish. Some people even brought leashes and pretended their pet was lost when encountering a police officer. Memes on this topic were identical in Italian and Russian, except for pun-based jokes, such as the meme about invisible animals because they are cockroaches in the mind.

Another sociocultural topic reflected in the memes was pets forced to share territory with a person, endure constant affection, and pretend to be obedient. In this regard, memes appeared on the Russian and Italian Internet depicting sleeping, tired

pets with disgruntled faces, dreaming that their owners would quickly go to work. The memes were accompanied by text: "Sit down, I need to talk, are you going to work at all or what?" and "Lord, let them go to work!" In addition, there were many memes on the network about cats who were surprised by the constant presence of the house owners, tired of excessive attention, and trying to send the owners to work. Usually, the cats in the photographs have a serious and businesslike appearance, sit in human poses (for example, with their front paws on the table), and ask their owner why he began to spend so much time at the cat's home. During a video conference, there were also memes where cats consulted with their "colleagues" about what to do in this difficult situation and how to cope with the lack of personal space.

However, the largest number of memes with cats, not with dogs, was in Russia. One of the most popular subjects was the meme with cats waking up their owner Natasha and telling her the latest news ("the dollar has fallen"), giving advice ("go to work"), and, of course, asking for food. A series of memes with Natasha's cats was so popular that some phrases became winged: "We dropped everything" and "Natasha, honestly." This meme has been widely used for irony about oil prices, constitutional amendments, quarantine, and more. In this case, we have a vivid example of when a meme becomes a kind of symbol of a pandemic, does not lose its relevance in the future, and continues to be used in political news and everyday situations.

Statements of Politicians

Special attention and analysis should be drawn to the memes that have become the focus of reflecting society's reaction to the statements of politicians. At the same time, an example of "spontaneous" political memes can be the responses of the network audience to certain statements or behavioral strategies not only of top officials of the state but also of local politicians. In Italy and Russia, heads of state (Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and President Vladimir Putin) have regularly addressed the nation to explain the measures to fight the virus. Among the Russians, the President's words about the nomadic tribes Pechenegs and Cumans (Polovtsy), who tormented Russia, evoked the most vivid response. The memes played out the rivalry of the people mentioned among themselves for primacy in Google trends, the consonance of the names of these people with the words "cookies" ("*pechenye*") and "pilaf"/"swimmers" ("*plov*"/"*plovtsy*"), they also reminded of the actor with the surname Polovtsev. There were memes with a historical connotation: The presidents of Mongolia and Tatarstan were offended that their peoples were not named, although they also tormented Russia, and the President of Poland, on the contrary, was glad that he was not mentioned. Memes (against a different background) explaining the election of Vladimir Putin were also popular: In a video message to raise the spirit of the nation, it was necessary to recall the important victory of the Russian people, but they talk a lot about the fight against fascism during the Second World War, and

the French, defeated in 1812, and are now suffering from Coronavirus themselves.

The Italians also remembered the most glorious period in their history: The very popular meme with the inscription "If we advance coughing, we will return the Roman Empire" (*se avanziamo tossendo, ci ripigliamo tutto l'impero romano*) against the background of the map of the conquests of the ancient Romans. Speeches by heads of state accompanied many memes before lifting the restrictions, and for the same reason, there were unclear instructions. The Russians were sarcastic that now it is not only possible but also impossible to have a walk, and the Italians understood from Conte's speech that Phase 2 is the same as Phase 1, but you can annoy your relatives.

Perhaps the most "memologized" statement by Premier Conte was the following phrase: *Dobbiamo dircelo chiaramente: Questo rischio c'è* (Let's face it: There is such a risk). The implication was the risk of a repeated increase in the incidence in case of non-compliance with the rules of distancing and hygiene. At the same time, the Italians suggested a huge number of life situations in which this phrase is appropriate (for example, the risk that the computer will freeze during distance learning or the excitement of a mother who lets the child go for a walk for the first time after the withdrawal of the self-isolation regime and is afraid that he or she will not return for dinner).

In addition to Giuseppe Conte, other Italian politicians became famous in the memes, for example, the governors of

some regions and mayors of cities. Some reacted very emotionally to violations of self-isolation by citizens and to attempts to circumvent the established rules. We can safely say that the leader in the number of memes was Vincenzo De Luca, President of the Campania region. Addressing the region's residents on March 20, especially the graduates who wanted to organize a celebration on the final research paper defense, De Luca said he would send carabinieri with flamethrowers for these holidays (Corriere della Sera, 2020). The Internet reacted to this with memes in which De Luca is depicted against the background of shots from the action films "Terminator," "Rimbaud," "Agent 007," and "I am Legend," and memes with sarcastic inscriptions, such as "De Luca prohibits the use of the ESC button on the keyboard," "God will forgive, but I will not," "Leaving the house to get some basil? Think of something better," and even an allusion to the famous Kant's quote "the starry sky above me, the law and discipline inside me." The latter contains an allusion to the governor's repeated attempts to refute the well-known stereotype about the disorganization of the Southerners.

Among Russian local-level politicians, the meme hero has undoubtedly become Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Firstly, the virus affected Moscow more than others, and the capital's lockdown was the toughest. Secondly, Moscow is the most visible among other cities, and Sergei Sobyanin is a frequent meme hero (*Strana poshla na popravki*, 2020). The main reason for

jokes is usually the economic activity of the mayor, namely, the shifting of tiles and curbs in the capital, which is not always of high quality and appropriate. The pandemic period was no exception: Muscovites joked that the mayor introduced a self-isolation regime so that new tiles would not get dirty or to replace infectious tiles with non-infectious ones.

The most popular meme was built on a play on the words "amendments to the constitution," which sounds like "get better," that is, start to recover. On different backgrounds (usually next to the portrait of Sobyanin), it was written that the country went on amendments, thus hinting at the relationship between voting on amendments and reducing the incidence rate. Such memes have captured the online audience's attention with viral speed because the genre of the memetic message itself is the best way to meet the communication needs of the modern public. In addition to the functional ability of a political Internet meme to instantly replicate, attention should be drawn to the predominantly ironic nature of most of such communicative formations.

Government-imposed Rules and Criticism

Separately, we will single out a group of memes related to the rules and measures introduced by governments. First, this concerns masks (the wrong way to wear them) and the need to keep a distance. Many memes are photographs of citizens who put on a mask over their eyes, make a hole in it for a cigarette or just to breathe, and also wear a mask instead of underwear (the government requires wearing a mask when going out, but nothing is said about the rest of the clothes). In Russian and Italian, many photo memes of objects, such as bras, panties, bags, and toy helmets, are used as masks. Russians and Italians were ironic that from constantly wearing masks, you will have to straighten your ears and wear a mask from behind. In terms of distance, the whole world saw an announcement that a distance of 1.5 meters is roughly the same as the length of an adult bear.

In Italy, the concepts of *assembramento* and *congiunti* have been discussed extensively. The first can be translated as "congestion," and the second as "relatives." Both words were used in the President of the Council of Ministers decree, which entered into force on May 4, 2020 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2020), and related to restrictive measures to combat the Coronavirus. Nevertheless, in modern Italian, these two words are used infrequently. Therefore, the Italians asked a logical question: How many people constitute an *assembramento*, and which of the relatives and friends includes the term *congiunti*, that is, whom you can see during the so-called Phase 2 fight against Coronavirus?

Thus, to answer whether a good meme can overcome local boundaries, we concluded that the above-stated categories of memes tend to be actively exploited outside local boundaries, mainly in political communication. The leading position after memes on the rush for essential goods

in Italy and Russia is occupied by the categories of memes on the topics of the rules imposed by the government during the pandemic and the statements of politicians. Another question is whether memes are always born spontaneously or whether most memes are introduced on purpose.

The performed analysis of the corpus of memes during the 2020 pandemic in Italy and Russia allows us to state that memes, due to their viral nature, not only infect the consciousness of communicants but also can change the mental attitudes and behavior of a person (Moiseenko, 2015). Memes can be considered a technology to create a mood or to push the interlocutor to a desired action. Furthermore, to attract attention, a message spread in the media must have an informational status or, in other words, contain new information. From this point of view, memes are deliberately created and forced, which contributes to managing events at the center of public attention (such as attracting or distracting attention, distorting the meaning of an event, and changing its scale). An example is a meme that came from offline, Navalny eating a *dosirak* (Korean instant noodle soup), which was launched on the web quite deliberately, and, of course, this meme is not the only one.

So, for example, the meme about the need to wear masks, aggressively and deliberately launched on the web, supplants the opposite belief that wearing masks is useless. Convincing people of the need for masks was more difficult than dissuading them from using them because it takes discipline, acceptance of the inconvenience,

and some effort. However, this meme won. To a great extent, due to the efforts of propaganda and largely due to objective necessity. It is quite characteristic that initially, even some doctors who had already changed their minds opposed the masks. Furthermore, this suggests we are unaware of which clichés to transfer and broadcast to others. In such a situation, a meme is an implicit tool for shaping public opinion, deliberately used in political technologies, advertising, branding, and marketing (Benaim, 2018).

Here are some more examples. One of the most popular plots in Russia was the meme about Maxim, who has been eating sausages all his life but refuses to take the vaccine because he does not know its composition. Similar memes depicting hot dogs, energy drinks, medicines, and the inscription: "No vaccine, because you don't know what is inside" can be found in different languages. On the Italian Internet, there were memes with images of people with sad, reflective faces and the caption: "Your face, when you just got vaccinated against COVID-19 and learned that COVID-19 Pro has appeared." Furthermore, on the same wave in Italian social networks (Veneto region), there was a meme with the image of a car carrying wine bottles and a Pfizer label and the inscription: "The disappearance of the vaccine around the world, but not in Veneto." Another example is when, at the beginning of the pandemic in Russia, the conspiracy theory was somewhat popular: There is no virus. It is a conspiracy of politicians. The government started all

this by quickly adopting the Constitution without a vote. The date was called April 10. "Everything will be over in April 10," said housewives from WhatsApp chats with a sage look.

Italian and Russian memes are grouped into categories representing the most important events and problems of the time that found their response on various networks. In both countries, the drastic events of 2020 were interpreted with wit and irony, alleviating people's condition at the time. The differences are mostly connected to different backgrounds of the cultures. However, overall, we can state that memes reflect a similar reaction to the pandemic and a similar use of memes in Italian and Russian cultures (Figure 3).

The diagram shows the breakdown of all collected memes by their meaning. It represents the similarities between the countries, which are the unconditional love for pets (the biggest number of memes in both languages) and vivid response to the changes that matter most in people's lives

(remote work and distance learning). We can also observe that the shift to distance learning in Russia caused more problems, challenges, and funny situations, resonating with more memes in this area.

DISCUSSION

The examples confirm that memes can manage information flows, causing socially significant consequences, such as influencing public beliefs and the choice of politicians. In addition, due to the halo of mass coverage, entertaining character, and affinity to the emotions of the addressee, the meme reflects the opinion of most users and does not need the category of authorship. Due to the lack of dialogue, the meme is either skipped or perceived and subsequently distributed by the recipients.

Why do some memes become popular, and why are some long-lasting (Berger & Milkman, 2012)?

All memes flare up instantly and brightly, but many are ephemeral. Having appeared and being transmitted in blogs,
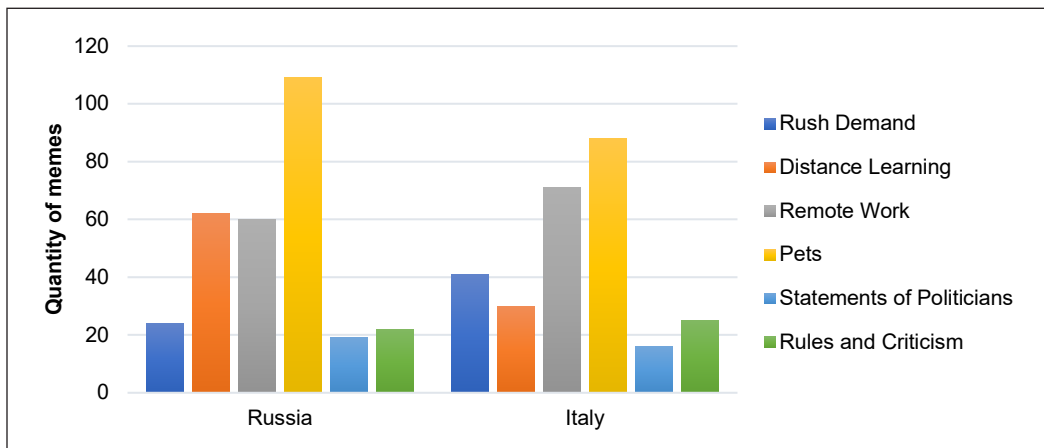

Figure 3. Semantic groups diagram

forums, image boards, social networks, and memes creates an illusion and imitation of communication. The meme aims at a comic rethinking of reality. As a result, the recipient will pay attention to those memes that reflect his emotions and ideas, creating the effect of reciprocal communication. In practical terms, thanks to this illusion, it becomes possible to introduce an idea or image together with an important message to the recipient.

Virtual reality formed on the Internet has specific properties: (1) Generation, (2) relevance, (3) autonomy, and (4) interactivity. Often, the most popular is a meme, which is absurd and, at the same time, does not require additional meanings. On the other hand, many memes reflect a certain communicative type, but they cannot adapt plastically to changing interests. However, suppose the created meme has become popular and entrenched in a virtual environment. In that case, later, it can form a way of realizing actual needs or suppressing some and strengthening other aspirations. In this case, is it legitimate that a meme can be identified with a cultural universal and be the main broadcaster of society and culture?

From the point of view of cultural linguistics, memes are considered units carrying cultural information capable of replication. Culture means what people do in a certain society at a certain time. It is often impossible to understand memes without special cultural background knowledge. For example, in Russian-language discourse, allusions to Soviet topics are often found, and Russians also like to refer to the classics of literature and play with aphorisms. A popular meme usually contains a play on words and requires additional knowledge. On the other hand, the information environment filled with memes can self-organize and contain the qualities of proverbs and sayings that convey the accumulated social experience. Culturally significant memes can be nationally conditioned and understandable within a certain national community. Alternatively, it can be created within the framework of a small local group that is not widely known. Notably, Russians and Italians willingly use meme templates referring to famous American movies, but the references to their culture are numerous. Furthermore, the rethinking of local realia in a humorous way says a lot about the people's creativity and the self-criticism of Italians and Russians.

At the same time, we can talk about universal memes that are understandable to everyone worldwide since some cultural facts are common. So, during the pandemic, memes began to appear on the Internet that play up popular stereotypes about Russians. For example, a meme depicting people who began to turn into Russians after vaccination—started wearing a hat with earflaps or riding a bear, turned into Putin or a bear. The traditional and primary Russian drink samogon, as well as the process of its production, gained fame all over the planet and became a topic for memes many times. On the Russian-language Internet, you can find memes depicting scenes from the film "Samogonshiki" (producers of samogon) and lines that rare footage from

the laboratory for creating a vaccine against Coronavirus was published on the network.

In this case, we can say that such memes do not directly carry valuable information, do not assert directly, but rather evoke certain associations. A meme in modern society is a super language, which often makes more sense than it might seem at first glance since analyzing memes in a certain historical context makes it possible to predict social and cultural changes.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the corpus of memes as a focal point for reflecting on the 2020 pandemic period allowed us to identify culturally significant stereotypes and values in each linguistic community. Memes, which originated in the media space and are now widely shared through reposting, have become a sociocultural phenomenon that creates a sense of belonging within a virtual group. The need for text-based expression in a fast-paced and interactive system encourages dialogical communication and requires concise yet expressive messages. We note such characteristic features of a meme as (1) its targeting, (2) closeness to colloquial speech and a particular subculture, (3) quick accessibility, (4) fast forgetfulness, (5) amusement, (6) reliance on a stereotype, (7) interactivity, (8) the ability to evoke vivid emotions, (9) self-replicate, and (10) viral character.

The culture of memes has much in common with the culture of anecdotes, aphorisms, and sayings but synthesizes them into one complex. The interpretation of the meme is not the main thing. The meme should be understandable for everyone thanks to the pattern by which it is made. The following parameters determine the survival and prevalence of a meme: (1) extreme simplicity, (2) ease of creation, (3) compensatory needs of the target audience, (4) attributiveness (the ability to label oneself and others with the help of a meme), and (5) the relevance of the problem in question. The analysis shows that if, in everyday life, a meme performs the function of a communicative and is used to connect words in sentences, then memes functioning in the media space during the 2020 pandemic reflected real and most relevant events for society, interpreting them mainly in an ironic way (Dynel, 2021), becoming an implicit tool for shaping public opinion.

Thus, meme plays a double role in the structure of modern Internet communication, and due to such popularization, memes become an obligatory feature of communication in any community, even if it is aimed not at entertainment but at informing the audience.

The research results can be used in the future to compare memes of culturally more "distant" countries (a European with an Asian one, for example). Also, it would be interesting to analyze, on the contrary, the COVID-19 memes of culturally close European countries (like Italy, Spain, and France). As memes contain culturally relevant information, their analysis and discussion can be used in teaching a foreign language (in our case, Italian).

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