The article studies the phenomenon of the Internet-meme as the main structural unit of the modern media discourse, performing the functions of integration, translation, representation, information, as well as emotional and phatic functions. The main characteristics of the Internet meme as a media image, which has been considered for a long time as an Internet phenomenon of the game plan, aimed at achieving a comic effect, are analyzed.

The paper applies a semiotic-linguistic approach to the analysis of forming Internet-memes, allowing to understand how any sign turns into a meme as well as narrows the object of the analysis to communication phenomena expressed through verbal and non-verbal means. The mechanism of compression is considered as a linguo-cognitive technique for creating Internet-memes. Firstly, the compression mechanism involves the simplification of the text of the meme and its surface structure according to the law of language economy, the requirements of the genre, and the characteristics of the information carrier, which leads to an increase in the information content of language units and the elimination of components that can be restored using the non-verbal part of the text without changing its informative side. That is why there is a frequent use of various kinds of elliptical structures in Internet memes. Secondly, compression allows reflecting colloquial language in Internet memes through the use of compressed units and constructions. At the same time, the mechanism of compression in Internet memes inevitably leads to an increasing role of background knowledge and initiates the process of inference, which is necessary for the recipient to understand the author’s implication.

Keywords: internet communication, internet-meme, semiotic-linguistic approach, linguo-cognitive mechanisms, compression

В статье исследован феномен интернет-мема как основной структурной единицы современного медиапространства, которая выполняет функции интеграции, трансляции, репрезентации, информирования, а также эмоциональную и фатическую функции. Проанализированы основные характеристики интернет-мема как медиаобраза, достаточно
долго рассматривавшегося как интернет-феномен игрового плана, направленный на достижение комического эффекта.

В работе использован семиотико-лингвистический подход к анализу создания интернет-мема, что позволяет понять, каким образом какой-либо знак превращается в мем, и в то же время сужает объект анализа к феноменам коммуникации, выражаемым с помощью вербальных и невербальных средств. В качестве лингво-когнитивных техник создания интернет-мемов рассмотрен механизм компрессии. Во-первых, механизм компрессии предполагает упрощение текста мема и его поверхностной структуры согласно закону экономии языка, требований жанра, и особенностей носителя информации, что приводит к повышению информативности языковых единиц и устранению компонентов, которые можно восстановить с помощью невербальной части текста, не изменения его информативную сторону. Именно поэтому в интернет-мемах наблюдается частое использование разного рода эллиптических конструкций. Во-вторых, компрессия позволяет показать в интернет-мемах живой разговорный язык за счет использования компрессированных единиц и конструкций. При этом механизм компрессии в интернет-мемах неизбежно ведёт к возрастающей роли фоновых знаний и инициирует процесс инференции, необходимый реципиенту для понимания импликации автора.

Ключевые слова: интернет-коммуникация, интернет-мем, семиотико-лингвистический подход, лингво-когнитивные механизмы, компрессия

У статті досліджено феномен інтернет-мему як основної структурої одиниці сучасного медіапростору, що виконує функції інтеграції, трансляції, репрезентації, інформування, а також емоційну та фатичну функції. Проаналізовано загальні характеристики інтернет-мему, що досить довго розглядався як феномен ігрового плану, спрямований на досягнення комічного ефекту.

У роботі використано семіотико-лінгвістичний підхід до аналізу створення інтернет-мемів, що дозволяє зрозуміти, яким чином будь-який знак перетворюється на мем, і водночас звужує об’єкт аналізу до феноменів комунікації, що виражаються за допомогою вербальних та невербальних засобів. У якості лінгво-когнітивних технік створення змісту мемів розглянуто механізм компресії. По-перше, механізм компресії передбачає спрощення тексту мема та його поверхневої структури відповідно до закону економії мови, вимог жанру та особливостей носія інформації, що призводить до підвищення інформативності мовних одиниць та усунення компонентів, які можна відновити з невербальної частини тексту, не змінюючи його інформативний контент. Саме тому в інтернет-мемах спостерігається часте використання різного роду еліптичних конструкцій. По-друге, компресія дозволяє показати в інтернет-мемах живу розмовну мову за рахунок використання компресованих одиниць та конструкцій. При цьому механізм компресії в інтернет-мемах неминує веде до зростання ролі фонових знань та ініціює процес інференції, необхідний реципієнту для розуміння імпликації автора.

Ключові слова: інтернет-комунікація, інтернет-мем, семіотико-лінгвістичний підхід, лінгво-когнітивні механізми, компресія

Introduction. In the digital age, the Internet is considered as a special informative, social, psychological and linguistic space, characterized by virtuality, interactivity, hypertextuality, globality, creativity, and anonymity [8]. Increased opportunities for immediate access to information have created new forms of communication like chats, forums, emails, advertisements, social networking sites. Internet discourse relies more and more on vestiges that combine images and linguistic
expressions to express and comment on points of view. Any video or a picture shared in the virtual community quickly gains popularity and finds its verbal expression - a key phrase or a caption, often in a comic or parodic style. Compressing complex ideas into small, viral, pocket-sized media like internet memes has dramatically changed people’s attitudes towards interaction. Ordinary people become agents and agenda makers with a reach that can transcend geopolitical boundaries through digital access. Internet memes represent a new springboard for engaging the masses at multiple levels. Adopting visual or verbal ideas, images (often humorous, comic or ridiculous), the Internet community curates and values memes as significant popular cultural moments through the processes of dissemination, replication and/or imitation. **This article traces** how memes that emerged in late XXth century provide the online community with live coverage of cultural events. Due to their concise and easily accessible qualities, they make themselves ideal vehicles for user-interpreted and simplified versions of cultural content.

**The study under review aims to study** the linguo-cognitive mechanisms of the formation of the English Internet memes in the process of interaction of its verbal and non-verbal components, in particular, compression, and identify the functions of Internet memes in the Internet communication.

**Recent researches and publications.** Despite the markedly increased interest of linguists in the constantly changing language of the Internet, Internet memes remain insufficiently studied and described in the scientific literature [1; 2; 4; 6; 8; 10; 11; 14]. The term ‘meme’ was coined by the British ethnologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his landmark work *The Selfish Gene* (1976) [3]. Dawkins whose primary interest was in replicability of genetic material, noticed that culturally transmitted concepts also have a way of perpetuating themselves – hence the term ‘meme’ as a complement to ‘gene’. Almost 40 years later, the term has been revived to describe digital objects containing “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” [11, p. 22]. There are, however, many approaches and perspectives that reflect the complex nature of this phenomenon. Carlos Díaz has recently analysed and contrasted different memetic definitional
frameworks in an effort to develop a formal characterization that could be used to study internet memes in various contexts: An internet meme is a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve [2, p.44].

Most researchers agree that an Internet meme is part of the information circulating on the Internet [1; 2; 4; 7; 8; 10]. At the same time, the Internet meme is often defined as a means of communication [2], i.e. the communicative potential of the Internet meme, its involvement in the process of computer-mediated communication is emphasized. N. G. Marchenko regards the Internet meme as a “repository of the cultural codes of the network community” [7, p. 113], thereby focusing on the cultural specificity of these units. They provide the users a podium to negotiate, and, reflecting everyday problems and events, to fulfill such functions as criticism, commentary, and entertainment. Researchers studying the Internet meme from the standpoint of linguistics define it as a speech genre [4], pointing out a number of discursive features inherent in the Internet meme.

One of the cognitive mechanisms actively used in forming Internet memes is compression. In a broad sense, compression as a linguistic phenomenon is simplification achieved in processing or generating the text and its surface structure due to the law of speech economy, the genre requirements, and the characteristics of the information carrier. It results in increasing the information content of language units and eliminating those components that can be restored from the non-verbal part of the text, without “changing its information side in comparison with the original text or the neutral stylistic norm” [5, p. 138].

The conceptual basis of the cognitive compression strategy is the universal principle of economy, according to which human activity is purposeful and involves achieving the ultimate goal with the least effort [12] and which is implemented in speech activity, in particular, in the form of various compressed structures, such as reduction, ellipsis, abbreviation. In this sense, compression is not just a convenient means for concise expression of thought, but an important cognitive strategy that
partially ensures the efficient operation of the brain, memory, and the process of generating speech, since it is the compression mechanism that ensures “saving of verbal and mental efforts and language means” [13, p. 294], and serves as a remedy “from all sorts of inconveniences that impede the work of memory, the implementation of certain brain functions associated with production and perception of speech” [13, p. 293].

Compression performs several important functions in Internet memes. First, compression allows distributing economically the text space of an Internet meme, which is limited. It is the small form of the Internet meme that dictates the frequent use of various elliptical constructions, where articles, possessive pronouns, a personal pronoun subject, the formal subject *It* with an auxiliary verb, and a linking verb are deliberately omitted. These elliptical structures make it possible to achieve the minimum form with maximum information content [12], while either auxiliary or significant words with no essential semantic load, the omission of which does not entail a loss of meaning and which are easily restored from the context, are omitted.

Compression is actively used in oral speech at the lexical and syntactic levels. At the lexical level, compression is implemented in the form of various abbreviations, telescoping, metonymy. At the syntactic level, compression is embodied in the form of incomplete sentences, short answers to questions, dots in various kinds of speech acts in order to avoid redundancy and repetition. It reflects G.P. Grice’s principle of cooperation, namely his postulate of Quantity: “Your statement should not contain more information than required” [8, p. 112]. It is these trends that are recorded in memes as an attempt to convey spontaneous colloquial speech. For example, *Figure 1* depicts an Internet meme using the abbreviation ‘CEO’, which means ‘Chief Executive Officer’; *Figure 3* shows an Internet meme with the telescopic unit ‘staycation’ (vacation at home), which means “holidays or holidays spent at home”, and in *Figure 2* - an Internet meme that contains metonymy “The Big Pigeon” (a joke for people who are aware of New York City because they know that there are pigeons everywhere who are not too afraid of people from being in the big city) [15].
One should note the numerous acronyms, which are often used in Internet memes, saving the time and effort of the Internet user, on the one hand, turning the language of the Internet in general, and the language of Internet memes in particular, into a kind of a closed code for the insiders, on the other hand. Internet memes 4, 5 and 6 use the acronyms ‘LOL’ (*Laughing out loud*), ‘TGIF’ (*Thank God it’s Friday*), and ‘BTW’ (*By the way*) [15].

The compression mechanism plays an important role not only in the process of economising the space of the meme, but also in the process of encoding information, because it is compression that makes it possible to encode information in a meme in the form of concise, compact verbal and non-verbal structures. The result is a product with a minimal shape and a capacious content. At the same time, compression implies not only the compression of some structures, but also the omission of those elements that can be restored from the context and the absence of which does not entail the loss of meaning. As a result, the compression mechanism initiates the process of inference, because the more the structure is folded, the more cognitive efforts need to be made to decode this structure, and the more important
the process of inference, decoding, “decoding” of what was “encrypted” begins to play [12].

Moreover, the more compressed the explicit verbal information in the meme, the more important the implicit information in the text begins to play. On the one hand, the implications acquire a greater semantic load, on the other hand, they serve as keys to understanding the meaning of the meme. For example, the meaning of the internet meme in Figure 6 could be understood only when understanding the author’s implication: users of social networks, *Facebook* in particular, make a large number of mistakes in the Internet communication, and need training and literacy improvement. However, the explicit form of the Internet meme itself does not contain such conclusions; it provides clues, hints for the recipient. This means that the process of inference, which can be understood as a process of interpreting the meme, includes understanding of the author’s implication.

It has been proved that the mechanism of compression in memes inevitably leads to the increasing role of background knowledge, which may be necessary for the recipient to understand the author’s implication. As C. Lankshear notes, “the gap between “what is said” and “what is understood” is filled by means of implicit conclusions (consequences) carried out using the existing knowledge base. [9, p. 226]. Since, due to compression, the meaning of the meme does not lie on the surface, but is hidden and needs to be “extracted”, background knowledge that can be considered ready-made meanings that “the cultural and linguistic community offers its members” [10, p. 111], become “guides” in the meaning of the meme. For example, interpreting the Internet meme in *Figure 7* requires specific background knowledge, namely, the addressee user has to infer the referent of “my God” (Steve Jobs) and adjust the coded concept for “God” metaphorically; access the background knowledge of the type of the meme depicted (Hipster Barista) and access background knowledge of the fact that hipsters love Apple products, together with some background knowledge on Nietzsche and in which circumstances that phrase was produced. Ignorance of this reality entails a complete misunderstanding of the meme.
The compression mechanism also affects possible interpretations of the meme, because the ‘understatement’ that occurs as a result of compression implies the active participation of the recipient in decoding the meaning. The recipient does not receive a ready-made meaning, but actively “extracts” it based on his/her thesaurus.

Moreover, each recipient puts personal meaning into a separate Internet meme, i.e. enriches the semantic field of the meme. Different recipients may have different interpretations of the meme, while “the range of comprehension cannot be limited either by what the author originally had in mind, or by the personal outlook” [13, p.328]. Take, for instance, the sexist meme depicted in Figure 9. Upon receiving this meme, different interactions with individual users will be produced depending on the users’ own beliefs and ideas about women’s role compared to men’s (overlapping, overall matching, utterly different, etc.). Furthermore, different interactions with individual users will generate a number of non-propositional effects: some users will be amused; others will be disgusted. Some will feel part of the group; others will wish they were not part of the group, etc. And these unique implications with specific users will determine both the eventual interpretation obtained (propositional and non-propositional) and the user’s willingness to engage in the chained propagation of the meme.
Conclusion. As can be drawn from the previous discussion, internet memes present a structural, cognitive, pragmatic, and discursive complexity. They are multimodal, multi-level blends that affect our understanding of the world, which is slightly modified every time we “unpack” them. The ability to connect, transfer the output to the blend, and notice the analogy between different elements and their features makes us think creatively. Using our background knowledge and interpretations of the world, we can enrich and develop the blend. This also explains why each newly created meme is slightly different from the previous one, while functioning in the generally accepted context (semantic frames) of a given culture and language.

It is often assumed that memes constitute a playful or even mocking look at the reality that surrounds us. Under the cover of sarcasm we can try to see the viewpoints shared within and between different internet communities, addressing various issues. Each template meme, in order to be reproduced, must be made according to certain rules, conventions and style. They have a connotated meaning and evoke specific associations. Memes are intertextual and allusive – they refer to other memes, well-known figures, or current political and cultural events. Metaphor, personification and metonymy, as well as compression, are important means of constructing memes.

The compressed form of the Internet meme is its important feature, because, firstly, compression facilitates the process of replicating the meme on the Internet, and secondly, it makes it easier to understand, decipher the meaning of the meme for an Internet user. The compression mechanism is actively used in Internet memes,
primarily as a tool to economize meme space. It also encodes information into compact, concise structures, increasing the importance of implication and inference, and provoking multiple possible interpretations of the meme.

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