Precedent Phenomena as the Basis of Laughter Culture in the Internet Communication

Anna A. Ierusalimskaia

Elena P. Kartashova

Mari State University, Yoshkar-Ola, Russia
Email: ieanna@yandex.ru

Abstract

Internet is a rapidly growing social media so the theoretical and practical issues connected to it have been widely studied by many disciplines including linguistics. Still there are some poorly covered areas. The purpose of this research is to identify the significant principles and rules of creating laughter moment in the Internet communication. The article shows how the main characteristics of the Internet (anonymity and carnivalization) influence the image of the user. The Internet space determines the verbal behavior of users who want to give their messages expressiveness and attract others' users attention. One of the most popular ways of making users' speech more expressive is stylistic language game based on precedent phenomena. The material of the article contains over 1600 extracts from public pages in the most popular social network vkontakte. This material allows to identify the main methods of creating comic effect employing precedent phenomena. All the selected extracts from social public pages have been analyzed and the results are presented in the article. This study may be useful for Russian language teachers in schools and universities.

Keywords: precedent phenomena, Internet communication, comic effect, carnival components

1. Introduction

Internet communication is one of the new and rapidly developing speech formations. A distinctive feature of Internet communication is a variety of forms of communication: users can choose frequency, mode and way of communication. The network provides a great number of roles users can choose from: they can be either "a silent observers" or "an active speakers"; "a troll" or stay invisible. Despite the variety of communication forms and roles in the field of personal communication on-line another unifying feature of the Internet communication is users' desire to attract as much attention as they can to their messages or on-line behavior. This desire is embodied by users mostly on the basis of exploiting the culture of laughter. Involving laughter in any context is that makes any interaction on-line more lively, informal and light.

1.1 Actualizing the problem

The principle to bring laughter in communication has been learned by Internet users in real life communication and it is commonly employed in social networks operating on-line. It is fair to say that jokes and anecdotes posted in social networks are often based on precedent phenomena. Though there are a lot of studies devoted to the communication in the Internet which are conducted by quite a number of Russian linguists still there are some blank areas in studying particular features of virtual communication such as particular characteristics of Russian language used in Runet. The interaction between precedent phenomena and the Internet communication is a quite new field for Russian linguists, therefore, it has become the main topic of our current interest. The aim of this paper is to analyze, qualify and describe main precedent phenomena involved in comic effect based on the language game.

1.2 Materials analyzed in the paper

Various genres of Internet communication involve comic elements at different extent: in some genres, for example, in blogs funny elements have supporting values, whereas in chat genre comic elements play a key role, since the aim of the chat users' is to attract other users' attention to their messages left in the chat and become "one minute leader" of the chart. The object of this work is a number of public pages in social networks vk.com. This network is the most popular equivalent of Facebook in Russia and Ukrain: 486,324,974 times Internet users visited this social network in April, 2015

(according to statistics at http://www.liveinternet.ru). The material used in this article was taken from following public pages (the names of the public pages are given in Roman alphabet): Kak ya vstretil stolbnyak (https://vk.com/stolbn), Shedevry reklamy (https://vk.com/bestad), Lectorium (https: // vk .com / lectorioom), Kratkiy Peresskaz (https://vk.com/gfact), Dzen (https://vk.com/dzenpub), Namalevich (https://vk.com/namalevich), WowReklama (https: //vk.com/wow_reklama), Chetkiy prikol (https://vk.com/leprofun), Korporatziya zla (https://vk.com/evil_incorparate). These public pages are quite popular among users of social networks, the numbers of subscribers are presented in Table 1 (data from 05.05.2015).

These pages combine the genre of commentary and genre of Internet jokes (memes). The content here is built on jokes on the topic of the day, collected either from the open spaces of the Internet or created by administrators or submitted by the subscribers. Funny memes in these public pages can have different formats such as a text, creolized text, a funny picture (often edited in Photoshop), or it can be a combination of two of formats: a text and a picture, a creolized text and a plain text, a creolized text and a picture. It is fair to say that the latter combination could be hardly found on public pages. We would explain it in this way: combination of two visual ways of showing expression gives the opposite effect to the synergy one. Though, creolized texts of other genres usually enhance comic expression. (Kartashova, 2014).

Jokes (involving text or creolized text) on the public pages mentioned above are often built on the basis of the language game. The subject of this study is language game, based on the use of a variety of precedent phenomena. Precedent phenomena could be presented by precedent sayings, precedent texts, precedent names and precedent situations (Birukova, 2005).

Table 1. Number of subscribers of humorous public pages′ in vk.com studied in the article

Public page in vk.com	Number of subscribers
Korporatziya zla (https://vk.com/evil_incorparate)	5,717,120
Shedevry reklamy (https://vk.com/bestad)	2,391,605
Chetkiy prikoly (https://vk.com/leprofun)	1,786,436
WowReklama (https://vk.com/wow_reklama)	1,140,424
Namalevich (https://vk.com/namalevich)	717,419
Kak ya vstretil stolbnyak (https://vk.com/stolbn)	733,865
Dzen (https://vk.com/dzenpub)	585,144
Kratkiy Peresskaz (https://vk.com/gfact)	455,206
Lectorium (https://vk.com/lectorioom)	23,390

As Table 1 shows these public pages have got a wide audience though it should be noted that the subscribers are not very eager to leave any comments to memes presented there. The subscribers prefer to share jokes from these pages on their personal pages in vk.com, i.e. the users show the interest to the posts via their behavior but not verbally.

1.3 Methods

The article uses a complex approach to the material study. The material for this paper has been collected using the method of complete extracting of precedent texts, i.e. we have extracted all the content containing precedent phenomena from the mentioned before public pages from April,1 to April,30 2015. Thus, the data file studied in this paper contains 1668 extracts. Other scientific methods have been used as well such as descriptive, analytical, comparative and typological methods. These methods together have given to our research the required completeness. The descriptive method allows showing how precedent phenomena are used and changed by the users. The analytical, typological and comparative methods help identify prevailing tendencies in dephraseologization and set common patterns of how other precedent phenomena are used on-line.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Specific features of Internet communication as important factors influencing users' verbal and non-verbal behavior

It is noted (Ierusalimskaia, 2014) that verbal behavior in the Internet communication is rather conditioned by specific features of the Internet medium than by individual psychological, emotional, cultural and intellectual characteristics of a

user. Goroshko E.I. (Goroshko,2007) mentions that the specificity of communication in the Internet is affected by the following factors: the inhomogeneity of the Internet social environment, the illusion of freedom, a greater degree of anonymity, a lack of elements of non-verbal communication, written mode of communication, tolerance, the strategy catch up on communicative situation. These factors determine not only the verbal strategy selected by the user, but also his self-representation and non-verbal communication strategies in the Internet.

Internet being an anonymous environment offers an important option for a modern man which is safety: in the network one can safely build a new identity which would correlate with a real personality in a different way in each individual case. The most common network identities are exaggerated and flashy. Internet users tend to highlight their greatest strengths, as online environment allows controlling completely the virtual image. Zhichkina A.E. and Belinskaia E.P. (Zhichkina & Belinskaia, 2014) note that the degree of distinction between virtual self-representation and actual identity depends on the degree of dissatisfaction with human social categorization in real-life communication. The following reasons for creating a new virtual identity are defined as: desire to change their sex, age, and ethnicity, i.e. almost completely get rid of real-life identity or a part of it during a virtual session. (Savenkova, 2010) Another reason for creating a new virtual identity is following the decision to fulfill a dream and become for a short time somebody s/he cannot be (for example, when a man speaks on behalf of women, and vice versa).

Network communication allows users not only to completely change their identity, but also to highlight and show others a specific feature of their real personalities, which people have difficulties to express to in real-life communication. In addition, one more reason for building a new network identity is users' experiment with the purpose of observing or simply in order to gain new knowledge. Thus, anonymity, and as a result, and the sense of safety in the network (which may develop into the feeling of permissiveness) are important factors in the way the users represent themselves in the Internet which means that anonymity has a lot of impact on verbal behavior and other behavior strategies of the users . Anonymity of the Internet involves erasing boundaries and social thresholds between a sender and an addressee, a similar process in real-life communication is typical for carnival processions which erase the separation between performers and audience. One of the most important factors determining verbal behavior of Internet users is also carnivalization, "masking" in the virtual discourse. According to current studies (Savenkova, 2010), the main functions of carnival on-line is escaping social restrictions, having laughter at social structures and statuses, checking the toughness of banning mechanism. The strategy of communicative behavior or choosing either active or a passive role in the Internet is completely responding to the overall carnival masking of the virtual space. Internet users aim to draw attention in communication to his new network identity by all possible means. On one hand, pre-communicative means of self-representation are brought out in visual images displayed by users to everybody; on the other hand, the self-representation by verbal means is expressed in constant search for new and effective projections of new identities created on-line.

Language expression is one the most important powerful tools in this matter. Language expression is considered as "such property of the text or a part of the text that conveys a sense of increased intensity, expressing the internal state of the speaker and has the effect of emotional or logical strengthening, which may or may not be metaphorical" (Arnold, 1981). However, it should be noted that the expression of online communication shows rather projections of new virtual identities than the internal state of the speaker. Also, language expression responds to the requirements of being time compact, which is absolutely important for users of the Internet. Being in the situation of the rapid interactive communication, users try to say their jokes or share some funny information before the others, to draw attention to their virtual identities to become a "leader" polylogue. On the other hand, amount of information at present time have made people accustomed to short, succinct messages which express as a maximum of meaning and emotion as it is only possible.

2.2 Culture of laughter as an essential part of personal communication in the Internet communication

The idea to bring laughter in every post or message in personal communication on-line is required by common Internet features (anonymity and masking) and performs some important functions. Firstly, laughter is a tool which helps users to ease the atmosphere in personal communication or communication with a group or within a group. Secondly, laughter in the Internet benefits users in showing their new virtual personalities more efficient. It has to be mentioned that the public pages being considered in this article are mostly targeted to serve users' behavior as users prefer rather to share the memes on their personal pages than to comment them.

2.3 Precedent phenomena as a basis of laughter culture in the Internet communication

According to our observations, language game based on the precedent phenomena in the Internet communication is often built on the texts from commercials, winged words, popular song lyrics, movies, titles of well-known books, children's books, quotes from various official documents, phraseology. It should be noted that these sources of precedent phenomena are not equal in terms of popularity with users, according to our research data file 50% of Internet jokes are based on commercials, 12% are based on precedent texts and book titles, 10% are built on the texts from modern pop culture, 7% are using quoting phrases from movies, 5% are based on events which are widely discussed in media. Other sources of precedent phenomena have been found by us in insignificant quantities. In our data file 64% of memes are based on precedent sayings, 29% are based on precedent texts, 5% employ precedent names, 2% use precedent situations.

2.3.1 Precedent sayings as a source comic expression in the Internet communication

As it follows from the statistics shown above, users often use citations from TV commercials, while other types of advertising are less popular among users. Our selection of examples extracted from humorous public pages shows that virtual communicants use complete precedent sayings in different ways. TV commercials as precedent sayings are widely employed in the memes because they make a quite significant part of real-life communication. For example, *Pay taxes and sleep well.* (https://vk.com/leprofun) is a direct citation of a slogan from the social commercial persuading Russian citizens to pay taxes on time and in full. The author of this meme constructs his joke exploiting a very common method of adding extra parts. He adds *On the bench, in the cellars, in a train station.* and creates the effect of deceived expectation as well as actualizes the conflict between Russian citizens and high taxes taken by the government. Another example employing the method of adding components is presented here: *Toilet paper with holes - all in your hands !!* (https://vk.com/leprofun) (the original slogan goes as *All in your hands!* which is another social commercial) or *Today I was at the skatin rink. First, I skated, then skated on my knees, and then skated with face on the ice ... Now I am going to ride in the ambulance ... Movement is life!.* (the original slogan goes as *Movement is life*), etc.

Another example of this method comes from Dove chocolate commercial which goes as: *Instead of a thousand words* ... The meme based on this precedent saying goes as: *Work for food. Instead of a thousand – plov*. (https://vk.com/stolbn). Plov is popular inexpensive Russian food which is compared in this meme with delicious expensive chocolate, thus, the image of something cheap and plain is contrasted to the image of something expensive and exclusive. The author of this meme employs not only these two contrasting images but also involves such language tools as adding parts to the precedent saying and component substitution. This contamination of two language tools helps the author to expose the irony placed in the meme. If a user cannot implement this method by adding new words or sentence parts, he uses some visual support. The precedent phrase *Support domestic manufacturers* (https://vk.com/gfact) from a social commercial uses a visual image which depicts Russian cartoon character Piglet from Winnie-the-Pooh story that is standing with a gun on Disney Piglet.

Phraseological units as a precedent sayings are also involved in language game in Internet memes, but most users (90% of our selection of phraseological units) employ proverbs and sayings, but not idioms. Proverbs and sayings are included by Russian linguists in the broad field of phraseology. It should be noted that the language game based on the use of proverbs includes a limited set of units which are familiar to all Russian-speaking people and are included in a mandatory socio-cultural minimum. Proverbs and folk saying have a clear metaphorical foundation that makes them easy to break a phraseological unity into usually two distinctive parts. This kind of mobility allows meme authors to decrypt easily the irony and makes the irony easy to decipher for recipients. In these and further examples we tried to find English equivalents to Russian proverbs but the reader should keep in mind that these proverbs in Russain consist of two parts and one of them is omitted by the meme's author. For example, *Measure twice, and drink tea* (compare to *Measure twice and cut once*); *When you are done with things to do, drink tea* (compare to *When you are done with things to do, you can have fun*); Learning is light, and you drink tea (compare to *Learning is light, and you drink tea and ignorance is darkness*); Who gets up early drinks tea (compare to *God gives to ones who wakes up early*) (https://vk.com/stolbn) etc.. These units were placed within a single meme that already helps an addressee decipher the irony. This comic effect is enhanced by the stylistic effect when the proverb parts, which were supposed to be steady and unchangeable, have become variable, but an ordinary sentence (drink tea) has become a constant part. Replacing a composition component of proverbs and sayings is mostly demanded tool for the creation of irony (Kartashova & Ierusalimskaia, 2013). As mentioned above irony in online communication is often based on the effect of the deceived expectations when a user comes up with a joke involving a proverb saying as it seems the easiest way to make someone laugh. Let's look at the meme which was

named by its author as *A happy ending. A woman off the cart – SHE DRIVES HER NEW CAR, GOT A DRIVING LICENSE, FOLLOWS TRAFFIC RULES, RESPECTS PEDESTRIANS AND POLICEMEN SMILE TO HER* (https://vk.com/namalevich). Compare to the original saying which reads as *A woman off the cart horse has less job* . As it has already been mentioned that creolized texts play an important role in laughter culture (Kartashova, 2014), and the Internet users eagerly use them. Here are more pieces from the meme: *Free cheese! only find some time to chew, because during communism there would be enough SAUSAGES, CAVIAR, VODKA, JOY and HAPPINESS* comparing to the original saying *Free cheese can be found only in a mouse trap*; *It doesn't matter how much you feed, an elephant has got PEACE, CHILDREN, HAPPINESS* comparing to *It doesn't matter how much you feed a wolf it still wants to get to the forest*, etc.

2.3.2 Precedent texts as a base of creation of the comic effect on public pages in Internet social networks

According to our observations modern pop culture is the most productive source of precedent texts. Song lyrics of modern Russian artists are often used to create language game twists in virtual communication but it should be mentioned that the comic effect of these precedent texts hits an "expiration date" as soon as the source is not popular any longer. In social networks, there are numerous public pages which are devoted to language games with popular song lyrics (https://vk.com/bestad). For example: *And the lamp is not working / And the kettle does not wistle / And there is no electricity / Then you gotta pay* compare to the original source *And the lamp is not working / And the calendars all lie / And if you want to say something / Then say* (lyrics from the song by the rock band Splin), etc.

Analyzing the use of precedent texts from literary works, it is important to note that the most productive elements are borrowed from folk sources usually traditional Russian fairytales (introductions, endings, preludes), for instance: - *Who on earth is sweeter, more rosy and more pale? / - You, of course, there is no doubt! Put down the gun.* (https://vk.com/wow_reklama) Compare to the original source: *Who on earth is sweeter, rosier and paler? / - You, of course, there is no doubt!* (from the fairytale Sleeping beauty by A. Pushkin). One of the most popular sources of precedent texts in internet communication is the genre of children's books: *Little daughter came to dad / And the baby said: / "Dad, I'm expecting a baby." / Dad became sick* (https: //vk.com/wow_reklama).Compare to the original source: *Little baby son came to dad / And the baby asked / What is good and what is bad?* (a poem for kids by Mayakovskiy V.), etc.

As the reader can see from these examples two main methods users employ to create irony involving precedent text are substitution of particular components and adding new parts. Comic effect is provided by breaking magic, naive images when memes' authors contrast them to ordinary and plain images involving elements of conversational speech style and sometimes even obscene language. It should be noted that precedent texts taken from books are limited by school curriculum.

2.3.3 The role of precedent names in creating the comic effect in Internet social networks

It should be pointed out that precedent names are not much in favor among Internet users as comic effect based on a precedent name requires some erudition from memes' authors and recipients. Precedent names used for creation of comic effect in the Internet communication are limited by particular fields of socio-cultural knowledge such as film and book titles, precedent names from school curriculum books. As for precedent film titles memes' authors mostly employ the titles of Soviet classic films and recent films which were widely advertised, for example, *Be aware of vehicle, of a slipper and a broom* (the meme with the picture of the cat) which should remind a recipient about Soviet classics film *Be aware of vehicle* ; or *Three levels above the chin level* which is supposed to remind about the film *Three levels above the sea*, (https://vk.com/wow_reklama), etc. Book titles as precedent names are presented by recently published books, for example, *Eat, Pray, Love, but please do not post it all in Instagram* or *50 shades of blue. The leading part belongs to the dark circles under your eyes* (https://vk.com/namalevich), etc. It is worth to note that precedent names of literary works are rarely employed in sense of comic effect because they demand from recipients to have particular cultural knowledge to decipher hidden irony: *Awakened by bloodlust, trams in gloomy early hour standing up drink spilled oil to all the Anns* (https://vk.com/gfact). Here the author implies the precedent name *Anna* from the book "Master and Margarita" by M. Bulgakov.

2.3.4 Precedent situations and their role in creating the comic effect in Internet social networks

According to our observations precedent situations employed for comic effects among all of the precedent phenomena

are the least popular. This kind of small demand can be caused by several factors: firstly, a situation which would be understandable by all the recipients is hard to find, for example, *4% charge on the phone, and I feel like I'm running out of oxygen.* (https://vk.com/evil_incorparate). Secondly, Internet users prefer to build irony based on precedent situation, using recent situations familiar to everyone in Russia. For example, the situation with Evgenia Vasilyeva' case, which, according to many people, has not received the deserved punishment for her crimes. In public page (https://vk.com/evil_incorparate) after the trial her picture has been posted with the logo of the store of cheap food stuff *Pyaterochka*. Pyatorochka's logo contains number 5 which also the highest grade in Russian schools. The author of this meme expresses his amusement of how gracefully Evgenia Vasilyeva has escaped the proper punishment. As this example shows, language game based on precedent situations is conditioned by current situation which will be forgotten after some time that is why precedent situation memes are hard to find.

3. Conclusion

Thus, precedent phenomena are productive sources of creating language game in the Internet communication. Participants of the Internet communication employ mainly precedent phenomena which are familiar to everybody, i.e. Russian native speakers see or hear them many times every day (commercials), or precedent phenomena are included in the language image of the world (folk fairytales and children's books), or precedent phenomena are taken from the social cultural minimum (works of the curriculum). The most common way of expressing irony via precedent phenomena is literalization involving methods of adding a new context or a picture and component substitute. Moreover, employing all modern options offered by the Internet, users often combine language elements and visual elements which support each other or contrast to each other.

4. Acknowledgement

References

Arnold, I.V. (1981). *Stylistics of modern English*. Moscow.
Birukova, N.S. (2005). About types of precedent phenomena. *Political linguistics journal*: 15:60-66
Chetkiy prikoly. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/leprofun (May 5, 2015)
Dzen. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/dzenpub (May 5, 2015)
Goroshko, E.K. (2007). Internet linguistics. *Genres and types of text in scientific and media discourse*, 5: 223-237
Ierusalimskaia, A.A. (2014) Precedent texts as a basis of creating of language game in the Internet communication. *Modern problems of science and education*; 3. [Online] Available: http://www.science-education.ru/117-13278 (May 5, 2015)
Kak ya vstretil stolbnyak. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/stolbn (May 5, 2015)
Kartashova, E.P. & Ierusalimskaia, A.A. (2013). Structural and semantical transformation of phraseological units. *Philological science. Issues of theory and practice*; 11:124-126
Kartashova, E.P. (2014) Creolized text as genre and stylistical phenomenon of Russian modern at the edge of XIX century. *Modern problems of science and education*; 6. [Online] Available: www.science-education.ru/120-16111 (May 5, 2015)
Korporatziya zla. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/evil_incorparate (May 5, 2015)
Kozhina, M.N. (2006). Stylistic encyclopedia dictionary of Russian language. Moscow.
Kratkiy Peresskaz. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/gfact (May 5, 2015)
Lectorium. [Online] Available: https:// vk .com/lectorioom (May 5, 2015)
Namalevich. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/namalevich (May 5, 2015)
Rating of Runet websites. [Online] Available: http://www.liveinternet.ru (May 5, 2015)
Savenkova, E.V. (2010). Carnival component in virtual communication. *Samara Humanitarian Academy Journal*; 1 (7): 33-41
Shedevry reklamy. [Online] Available: https://vk.com/bestad (May 5, 2015)
Vorozhtzova, O.A. (2007). Precedent phenomena in Russian and American presidential election discourse. *Political linguistics journal*: 3(23):69-73
WowReklama. [Online] Available: https: //vk.com/wow_reklama (May 5, 2015)
Zhychkina, A.E. & Belinskaya, E.P. (2014), Self-representation strategies in the Internet and their bound with reality [Online] Available: http://flogiston.ru/articles/netpsy/strategy (May 8, 2015)