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UKRAINIAN WARTIME SHIBBOLETH MEMES: EMERGENCE AND REPRODUCTION

The article is focused on researching the generation and spreading of Ukrainian wartime shibboleth memes created in 2022, continuing a string of papers published on the issue of meme definition, classification and analysis. Based on modern European, American and Ukrainian research, this study is aimed at describing, analyzing and illustrating the influence of wartime stress on the generation of special 'shibboleth memes' based on the idea of a 'friend-or-foe' system. Memes are a prominent part of communication and are defined as the main unit of cultural transgression or succession. Despite the definition of meme being vague and non-consistent in various language studies, the idea of its semantic 'capacity' remains the same. The article redefines the notion of 'meme generator' suggested in previous papers and analyzes the fundamental works of scholars pertaining to modern memes. The author of the current research paper proposes a definition of a shibboleth meme. Analysis of memes falling under the criteria of this definition has been provided in the article. The memes mentioned in the article show that wartime (Ukraine 2022) has become a 'supergenerator' of memes, especially shibboleth memes. This study offers multiple prospects, such as further research on the influence of current events on meme generation, as well as further analysis of wartime memes as a whole, and provides prospects for a further study focused on memes, their history, variety and function in modern culture.
Keywords: *meme, shibboleth meme, semiotics, wartime neologisms.*

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УКРАЇНСЬКИЙ МЕМ-ШИБОЛЕТ В УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ: ВИНИКНЕННЯ І ПОШИРЕННЯ

Статтю присвячено дослідженню виникнення і поширення українських мемів-шиболетів в умовах війни, створених у 2022 році. Дослідження продовжує серію наукових праць, присвячених проблемі визначення, типологізації та аналізу мемів. Наукова розвідка ґрунтується на сучасних європейських, американських та українських дослідженнях і направлена на опис, аналіз та підбір ілюстративного матеріалу, що висвітлює вплив стресових умов війни на продукування особливих мемів-шиболетів, покликаних відрізняти «свого» від чужого». Меми залишаються важливим елементом сучасної комунікації та визначаються як основна одиниця культурної трансгресії. Хоча усі визначення мемів недостатньо чіткі та різняться у різних лінгвістико-семантичних традиціях, ідея семантичної «ємності» мема незмінна. У статті надано переосмислене поняття «генератора мемів», згадане у попередніх публікаціях на цю тему, проаналізовано фундаментальні праці, що стосуються сучасних мемів. Авторка статті пропонує визначення поняття «меми-шиболети». У статті проаналізовано матеріал, що підпадає під критерії визначення. Приклади мемів, наведені у статті, розкривають культурну специфіку генерації мемів-шиболетів в умовах військових дій. Результати дослідження показують, що війна стала надпродуктивним генератором мемів у 2022 році, особливо мемів-шиболетів. Дослідження передбачає широкі перспективи, насамперед подальші дослідження впливу поточних суспільних проблем на генерацію нових мемів, а також подальший аналіз мемів, що їх генерують в умовах війни. Крім того, це дослідження відкриває перспективи щодо подальшого вивчення мемів, їхньої історії, різноманіття та функції у сучасній культурі.
Ключові слова: *мем, мем-шиболет, семіотика, новотвори часів війни.*

Memes have been part of our everyday life since prehistoric times. Every significant social event, every outstanding personality became a source for generating new memes. From ancient sayings and catchphrases to the unrelenting viral spread of the modern meme via the Internet, humanity has always generated and reproduced memes, some of which have stayed with us throughout centuries, while others died as soon as the historical events or personalities behind them were forgotten.

It is only natural that wartimes, signified by events happening with breakneck velocity, have always produced memes in larger than normal quantities. People living through stressful times of military aggression cope with the heightened challenge by talking about it, and some phrases coined as a result of such talks become widespread, their 'lifetime' lengthened by constant reproduction from person to person.

For people living in countries at war, one of the defining concepts would be 'us versus them', or 'friend versus foe', as well as ways to distinguish one from the other. Thus, the third element of this research is the *shibboleth*, a linguistic way of weeding out enemies in times of conflict.

The background for the *meme* part of this article consists of research done by both pioneers in this area and modern scholars, providing definitions, classifications as well as linguistic and social analysis of the meme as an integral part of human communication, especially nowadays (Blackmore, 1999, 2000, 2001; Dawkins, 2006; Deacon, 1999; Díaz, 2013; Gleick, 2011; McNamara, 2011, etc.). Here, a special place should be given to Richard Dawkins who gave the first definition of *meme* back in 1973 (Dawkins, 2006: 192) as 'the main unit of culture transference or reproduction'. Modern scholars agree that memes are a unique element of cultural 'genome' which is characterized by 'viral' reproduction thanks to interpersonal and intercultural communication (Brodie, 2011; Blackmore, 1999, 2000, 2001; Marshall, 1998, etc.). The classifications and analysis mentioned above have also been amplified by the author of this research paper (Chernikova, 2016, 2021, etc.). The definition and analysis of the concept of the *shibboleth*, rooted

in events of conflict and wartime, is based both on sociolinguistic academic research (Busch et al., 2021; Gal et al., 2019; Greenberg, 2017; Kniffka, 2007; McNamara, 2005, 2012) and on the practical application of the shibboleth meme in social networks and blog articles, including research on shibboleth memes generated in wartime Ukraine. The current research paper is part of a series of articles focused on multidimensional analysis of memes as a semiotic, linguistic and social phenomenon.

The **topicality** of this research is predetermined by two primary reasons: first of all, memes are a unique cultural phenomenon with a long history of practical use and as a focus of academic research, especially modern Internet memes sprouting in vast quantities as a communicative response to any more or less significant sociocultural event; additionally, the use of shibboleths has pretty much as long a history as the meme itself and presents an academically interesting linguistic and cultural phenomenon as proved by the amount of research done on the topic; finally, considering the current social and political events in Ukraine, namely the country being the focus of Russian military aggression, the use of shibboleth memes during such times is what may be called more colloquially a 'hot topic' for both Ukrainian and foreign scholars.

As it has already been established, all three elements of this sociolinguistic problem have been the topic of multiple research papers published throughout decades. This paper is an attempt at uniting the phenomenon of meme first identified and defined by Dawkins (2006) and further studied and developed as a special social, linguistic and cultural problem, as well as the phenomenon of shibboleths during wartime, studied thoroughly both on the side of linguistics (Gal et al., 2019; Greenberg, 2017; Kniffka, 2007) and on the side of sociology and cultural studies, at times leaning heavily into political studies (Busch et al., 2021; McNamara, 2005, 2012; Patrick, 2004). The social and political undercurrent of shibboleth memes has also attracted the attention of blog writers and mass media (Raphaelson, 2018; Blog|on|Linguistics, 2013; Pecherskyi, 2022; Blanco et al., 2022), especially the use of shibboleth memes during wartimes in Ukraine.

The **purpose** of this article is to further the analysis of memes generated during significant social events, continuing the author's foray into 'coronaspeak' and pandemic memes where a group of memes 'born' during 2020-2021 was analyzed and it was concluded that the Covid pandemic is indeed one of the most powerful meme generators of the 21st century (Chernikova, 2021). Thus, the **objectives** of the current research are as follows: 1) to accumulate the research material via searching for relevant memes (shibboleth memes, especially those generated in 2022 Ukraine) on social networks, channels and blogs; 2) to assess the productivity of such shibboleth memes by analyzing their numbers and variations; 3) to categorize the wartime shibboleth memes according to the cultural and linguistic phenomena they have been based on.

Events such as wartime in relation to memes may be called powerful *meme generators* (Chernikova, 2016). A *meme generator* is defined by the author of this article as a cultural phenomenon or a widely known situation/personality, around which new memes are generated and reproduced in the communication space. *Productivity* of a meme generator is defined as 'the ability of a cultural phenomenon <…> to generate memes which are not only resilient in human communication, but also generate new memes' (Chernikova, 2016, 2021). In the paper focused on the 2020 Covid pandemic in the context of meme generation and reproduction (Chernikova, 2021), it was argued that said event had the highest meme productivity level due to the sheer amount of memes generated and reproduced in 2020-2021 alone.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which moved into an active phase in February 2022, may be considered a super-powerful meme generator in and of itself. However, studying war memes in general would require a much larger amount of research and material. Thus, this paper deals with wartime shibboleth memes only, and uses some of the most striking examples to illustrate the popularity of those memes in wartime Ukraine.

For the purposes of this article, the definition of a *shibboleth meme* will be as follows: *a shibboleth meme is a meme deriving from linguistic, social and cultural differences between 'us' and 'them' to showcase the inability of 'them' to grasp the subtleties of 'our' phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, or the intricacies of 'our' social and cultural life*. Such inability is often explained by 'their' chauvinism and refusal to consider any other language or culture equal to 'their' own. In the context of wartimes in Ukraine, 'their' linguistic inabilities are often referred to as 'Russian-speaking jaw'. Interestingly, said meme was originally launched by Russian speakers, as a way of explaining their ineptitude in mastering the Ukrainian language despite being citizens of independent Ukraine for thirty years.

The definition of *shibboleth*, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is 'a word or saying used by adherents of a party, sect, or belief', or 'a custom or usage regarded as distinguishing one group from others' (Merriam-Webster: Shibboleth). The word itself, as well as the first documented example of its use, comes from the Bible, namely Judges 12:4-6: 'And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand' (King James Bible). The passage describes the use of a specific linguistic difference between two dialects as a type of 'friend-or-foe' system.

Interestingly, the most popular (at least 27,000 Google results only) Ukrainian wartime shibboleth meme, *palianytsia*, follows the same basic principle as the *shibboleth/sibboleth* divergence between the biblical Gileadites and Ephraimites: it is claimed to have been used by Ukrainian armed forces to single out Russian infiltrators who would struggle with pronouncing said word correctly due to phonetic differences between the Ukrainian and Russian languages (Ukrainian, unlike Russian, uses the palatalized [ц`] sound quite frequently). The meaning of the word, 'a special type of bread made of wheat flour' (Palianytsia), is mostly irrelevant for the direct 'friend-or-foe' purpose, but quite relevant for memes derived from this situation (Fig.1):
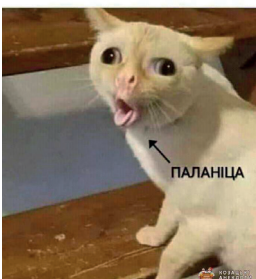
Figure 1. Palianytsia represented on a Ukrainian postal stamp

Shortly, the situation led to the generating of multiple memes, some of which were drawing directly from the usage of the word as a 'friend-or-foe' detection system to single out infiltrators (Fig.2):

Figure 2. 'Palianytsia'-based memes deriving from the word's anti-infiltrator properties

Among these five sample memes used for illustration purposes, the first one draws parallels between the plot of *Arrival* (first contact with non-humanoid aliens) and the Ukrainian wartime situation described above, essentially likening the enemy to alien invaders; interestingly, before its well-known meaning of 'beings from outer space', the word *alien* in English used to mean just 'strange' or 'foreign' (Merriam-Webster: Alien). The second meme uses the 'identical Spider-Men' template (Know Your Meme: Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man) to emphasize the difficulty of weeding out infiltrators without using shibboleths. The third meme uses the 'coughing cat' template (Know Your Meme: Coughing Cat) often invoked to illustrate difficulties in pronouncing specific letters and combinations (like the German ö or French *eau*), making fun of the 'Russian-speaking jaw'. The fourth meme is based on the 'Dramatic Dmitry' template (Know Your Meme: Dramatic Dmitry), which ironically ties the supposed frustration of Russian infiltrators being unable to pronounce 'palianytsia' to the Russian roots of said template. The fifth and last meme uses the 'The Rake' template (Know Your Meme: The Rake), which is an example of so-called 'creepypasta', as in visual and other content created by Internet users to invoke urban legends. In this meme, the monster is threatening the infiltrators, making them say the 'unpronounceable' word or die.

Further development of the *palianytsia* meme shows how Ukrainian Internet users tasked themselves with searching for other Ukrainian words which could be used as shibboleths (Fig.3):
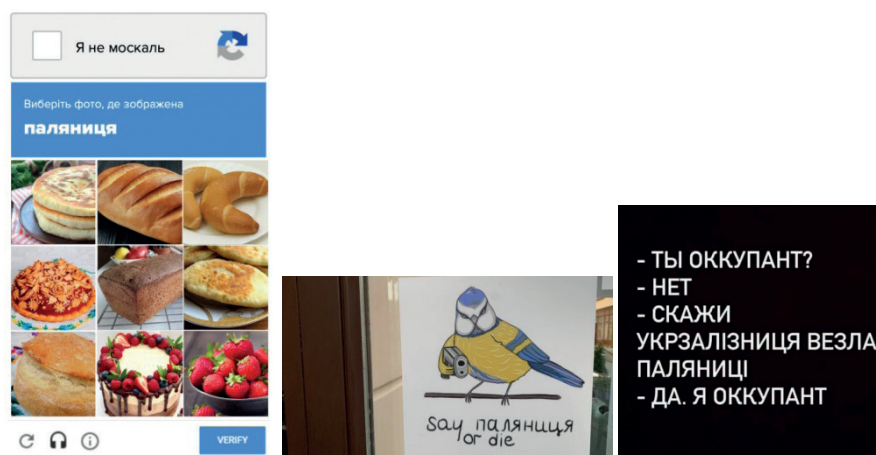
Figure 3. Other Ukrainian words with shibbolethic properties

All three memes used above for illustrative purposes yield examples of more Ukrainian words containing the difficult-to-pronounce palatalized [ц`] consonant at the end: *Ukrzaliznytsia* (Ukrainian railway company), *synytsia* (the Tit bird, or Parus) and *polunytsia* (strawberry).

On the social and cultural side, Ukrainian wartime shibboleth memes contain, among others, the following examples:

Bankomat Monobanku (Monobank ATM) or *Najblyzhche viddilennia Monobanku* (the closest Monobank outlet): the Ukrainian Monobank banking system is completely digital, having no physical outlets or ATMs; supposedly, this is something only Ukrainians know.

Lvivske metro (Lviv underground): in Ukrainian urban culture, there is a legend that Lviv has a secret underground system used by guerrillas, which is a place to make enemies disappear; actually, Lviv is one of the many Ukrainian regional centers which do not have underground transport.

Metro na Troieshchynu (Troieshchyna underground line): similar to the example above, the underground line in Troieshchyna (an informal name covering several districts in Kyiv) does not exist, although there have been plans to build one since the 1980s. The shibbolethic properties of this meme lie in the fact that it has often been used in social networks to confuse the enemy looking for confirmations of successful missile attacks.

Often, cultural shibboleths include lines from popular Ukrainian song lyrics (which the enemy is unable to finish), such as *Mertvi bdzholy ne hudut* (*Dead bees don't buzz*, a song by Pavlo Zibrov) or *Oleni Oleni* (*Deer deer*, a song by T.I.K.).

Overall, the research done for this paper showed that the memes yielded the following results: 1) the definition of a *shibboleth meme* has been given as 'a meme deriving from linguistic, social and cultural differences between 'us' and 'them'; 2) over 200 memes falling under these criteria have been gathered from the 2022 Ukrainian Internet segment and analyzed; 3) the memes have been divided into linguistic (60%) and socio-cultural ones (40%); 4) the frequency of their use has been confirmed by Google results as high.

The analysis of Ukrainian wartime shibboleth memes allows us to reach the following conclusions: 1) due to the high frequency of such memes in 2022 Ukrainian Internet segment, wartime has proved to be a 'supergenerator' of memes; 2) analysis of said memes shows that all of them contain a 'shibboleth' element (meant to confuse the enemy), either language-based or social/culture-based; 3) linguistic wartime shibboleth memes have been more productive than sociocultural ones.

Shibboleth memes, which became the focus of the current research paper, represent only a minuscule portion of Ukrainian wartime memes generated in 2022 and 2023 (so far). Classification and analysis of such memes provides a solid background for further study as a **prospect** of this research.

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