STYLISTIC TRENDS IN MEMETIC DISCOURSE: PHONO-GRAPHICAL ASPECT

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The present study focuses on the stylistic devices used in memetic discourse. The term memetic discourse is used to describe a communicative-pragmatic pattern of linguistic behaviour reflexed in memes. Intertextuality, as the foundation for memetic discourse, causes a humorous effect that contributes to emotional relief and cultural bonding.

Stylistic devices, also known as figures of speech, are essential linguistic mechanisms that enhance the text, making it more vivid and appealing to readers. These devices can be classified based on the language layers, our primary attention being given now to the phono-graphical level.

This article aims to examine the specific use of phono-graphical stylistic devices and investigate the stylistic distinctiveness encoded in memes. Drawing upon various meme pools, we chose to analyse stylistic trends due to the enormous number of existing memes.

Our study has identified nine phono-graphical stylistic devices employed in memetic discourse. Among them, alliteration and change of print appear less frequently, while graphon, layout, and multiplication are the most commonly utilised techniques. Instances of hyphenation, assonance, onomatopoeia, and capitalisation were also observed at moderate frequencies. This distribution may be accounted for by the nature of memes and their distinctive qualities: memes are aimed to be easily understood by a wide range of people, memorised, and duplicated. All this requires ease of perception and vivid appeal.

The cultural background of memes can explain their rapid spread. In addition, typical meme characteristics such as easy understanding, replication, recontextualisation, and remixing can also contribute to their vivid appeal and simplicity of perception. The stylistic trends we have established are likely to stem from comic book culture, owing to memes being a component of digital culture. In memetic discourse, two factors play significant roles: the narrative in drawings and the borrowing of cultural canons or literary tradition stylistic techniques. Memes merge these conventions, remix, and incorporate a contemporary vision that resonates with popular sentiment.

***Keywords**: cultural studies, meme, memetic discourse, stylistic device, phono-graphical stylistic device.*

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СТИЛІСТИЧНІ ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ В МЕМЕТИЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ: ФОНОГРАФІЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

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Це дослідження зосереджено на стилістичних прийомах, які використовують у меметичному дискурсі. Термін меметичний дискурс застосовують для опису комунікативно-прагматичного зразка мовної поведінки, відображеного в мемах. Інтертекстуальність, як основа меметичного дискурсу, викликає гумористичний ефект, який сприяє емоційному полегшенню та культурному зв'язку.

Стилістичні прийоми, також відомі як фігури мови, є важливими мовними механізмами, які покращують текст, роблять його більш яскравим і привабливим для читачів. Ці прийоми можна класифікувати на основі мовних шарів, при цьому основну увагу приділяють фоно-графічному рівню.

Мета статті – проаналізувати специфіку вживання фоно-графічних стилістичних засобів та дослідити стилістичну своєрідність, закладену в мемах. Спираючись на різні вибірки мемів, ми вирішили проаналізувати саме стилістичні тенденції через величезну кількість наявних мемів.

У нашому дослідженні висвітлено дев'ять фоно-графічних стилістичних прийомів, уживаних у меметичному дискурсі. Серед них алітерація та зміна шрифту трапляються рідше, натомість графон, художня графічна композиція тексту (layout) та повтор графем (multiplication) – найуживаніші техніки. Також із середньою частотністю спостерігаємо приклади використання дефісування (hyphenation), асонансу, звуконаслідування та капіталізації (capitalization). Таку дистрибуцію можна пояснити природою мемів та їхніми відмінними якостями: меми призначені для легкого розуміння широким колом людей, запам'ятовуються та дублюються. Усе це потребує легкості сприйняття і яскравої привабливості.

Швидке поширення мемів можна пояснити їхнім культурним підґрунтям. Крім того, типові риси мемів – легкість сприйняття, здатність до відтворення, реконтекстуалізація та реміксування – також сприяють їхній яскравій привабливості та простоті сприйняття. Виявлені стилістичні тенденції, імовірно, походять із культури коміксів, оскільки меми є частиною цифрової культури. У меметичному дискурсі ключову роль відіграють два чинники: наратив, переданий зображеннями, та запозичення стилістичних прийомів із культурних канонів або літературної традиції. Меми поєднують ці традиції, реміксують їх і вносять сучасне бачення, яке відгукується в масовій свідомості.

Ключові слова: *культурні студії, мем, меметичний дискурс, стилістичний прийом, фоно-графічний стилістичний прийом.*

Defining the problem. Meme studies have been in the spotlight of different scientific fields for the past decade. Such interest can be explained by the increasingly digitalised society in which we live. Information dissemination has evolved, and now it is spreading like wildfire. The focus of our paper is memes as units of information. Memes can be regarded as a conceptualisation of cultural capital [6], and as such, they may be seen as a means of achieving an advantageous position in a community. Thus, humorous and cultural implications are often applied to capture attention. In this context, memes, as a rule, evolve, change, adapt, remix and reshape to be spread virally by messengers and social nets.

In the broader sense, a meme is considered to be "everything that is passed from person to person" [4: 7]. According to S. Atran [2: 351], memes can be seen as "hypothetical cultural units passed on by imitation; although non-biological, they undergo Darwinian selection like genes". In addition, emotionality is considered one of the crucial characteristics of a meme [20: 69].

Memes as cultural units and social artefacts can be regarded as the basis of memetic discourse. The term *meme* is commonly referred to as user-generated,

remixed and recontextualised viral short text, video or image.

Since memes pass from one user to another, from one community to another, their creation and distribution can be seen as important in the cultural aspect. Everyone who participates in this process can become a creator. This is one of the essential characteristics of participatory culture, overall, its features are as follows [10: 7]: relatively low barriers to artistic expression and public participation; strong support for the exchange, creation, and use of collaborative products; a certain type of informal mentoring, when experienced participants transfer their knowledge to new people; participants who believe that their contribution matters; co-authors who feel a certain degree of social connection with each other (at least they are concerned about what other people think of their creativity). Furthermore, participatory culture changes the focus of literacy from individual expression to community participation. A likely explanation is that such a culture can use memes as social currency. The concept of social currency is based on achieving desired positive impressions from one's family, friends, and colleagues. There are three ways to do this: 1) find an inner sensuality; 2) identify the levers of the game mechanics; 3) feel like an insider [3: 24]. Inner sensuality is part of a person's creative self. The second way concerns knowing the realities and events that people are talking about and interested in at a given moment. Feeling like an insider can also be related to knowledge, but in the case of memes, it concerns the following aspects: who or what is the main subject of the meme and what exactly it signifies. One of the successful ways of spreading memes as social currency could be creativity.

According to J. Green and H. Jenkins [8: 110], people behave differently when they are aware that they can contribute to the conversation; this trait is seen as one of the crucial moments of the participatory culture. Meme has become a perfect vehicle for participatory culture. Throughout this article, the term *memetic discourse* will be used to describe a communicative-pragmatic pattern of linguistic behaviour reflexed in memes. Intertextuality, as the foundation for memetic discourse, causes a humorous effect that contributes to emotional relief and cultural bonding.

The analysis of previous research and publications. Stylistics, as the linguistic study of style in language, focuses on motivated choices and their interpretative consequences [13] and encompasses various language levels, including phono-graphical, morphological, lexical, and syntactical.

According to J. Lugea, "internet memes have underlying stylistic rules ... the tension between formal patterns and creative alterations makes internet memes prime candidates for stylistic analysis, where style is understood as a result of patterned 'choices' in expression" [12]. As the researcher states, internet memes "have not been subject to stylistic analysis despite ... their fit with the core concern of stylistics: linguistic creativity, as expressed through users' grasp of complex pragma-stylistic rules and ability to break those rules – in the 'right' ways – to serve rhetorical effects" [ibid]. In a similar vein, L. Boiko et al. view memes in terms of two dimensions of the stylistic system, including the diachronic and synchronic aspects, analysing metonymy, metaphor, and hyperbole as constituent parts of memes [5]. Along the same lines, H. E. Huntington applies the theory of visual rhetoric to the study of memes, offering a framework for the study of memes as symbolic, persuasive texts [9].

Stylistic devices, also known as figures of speech, are essential elements that enhance literary works, making them more vivid and attractive to readers [15]. These devices can be classified based on the language layers, our primary attention being given now to phono-graphical devices: alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, graphon, change of print, capitalisation,

hyphenation, multiplication, and layout [11: 13–15]. Their use in memetic discourse significantly differs from literary discourse, putting this study in line with contemporary meme studies. These stylistic devices are constructed based on the foregrounding of phonemes (or rather, sounds actualised in the text) and/or graphemes (actualised letters) due to their specific, non-standard use. A stylistic device is not a mere coincidence of sounds or letters; it is the purposeful construction of the text in such a way as to give it additional effects, in the case of phono-graphical devices – of euphony, cacophony, rhythm, and rhyme. While stylistic devices have been well-researched in literary discourse, this has not happened yet in memetic discourse.

The aim of the article is to analyse the use of stylistic devices in memetic discourse. **The object of investigation** is the stylistic specificity embedded in memes, **the subject** being the peculiar use of phono-graphical stylistic devices in memetic discourse. Since the quantity of memes is vast and not stable, out of this ocean of memes, we have selected certain meme pools that demonstrate specific trends of stylistic colouring and serve as the material for our investigation. Popular meme collections were the source for the selected examples, such as meme macros and LOLCAts.

Presentation of the main research material with substantiation of the scientific results obtained. Alliteration is the intentional repetition of consonants, which occurs in close succession at the beginning of the words. Such reiteration is deliberate, noticeable, and aimed at some acoustic effect, adding rhyme, rhythm, euphony, or cacophony to the message. Meme creators resort to this stylistic device quite often, as in the following illustration, where the sound [r] is repeated six times in one sentence, initiating six consecutive words **R**ECURRING, **R**EDUNDANT, **R**EPOSTS, **R**EALLY, **R**UIN, **R**EDDIT:
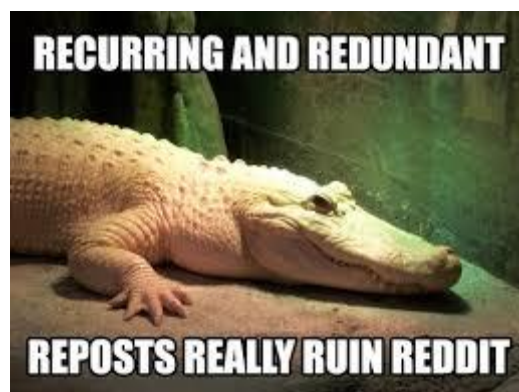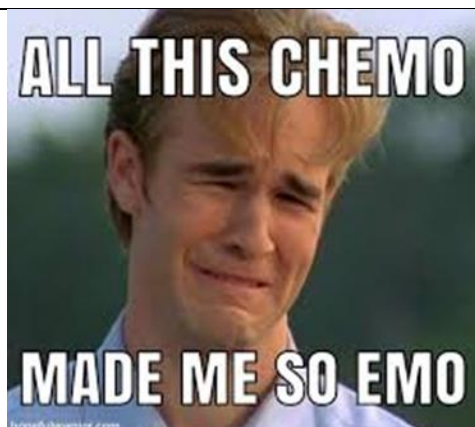

Picture 1.

There is a considerable difference in the use of alliteration in memetic and literary discourses. The latter is aimed at an aesthetic effect, thus creating poetic and emotionally charged descriptions of a landscape or the like, which is vividly demonstrated in the opening lines of *The Fall of the House of Usher* by E. A. Poe: "***D**uring the whole of a **d**ull, **d**ark, and soun**d**less **d**ay...*" [18: 81]. On the contrary, memes are designed to go viral, stand out, and be memorable. Another peculiarity of memetic discourse is the creators' awareness of the meaning behind their messages, often leading to the use of terminological humour. In the instance below, the term **alliteration** is accompanied by the example **C**OOL, **C**LASSY, AND **C**ASUAL:
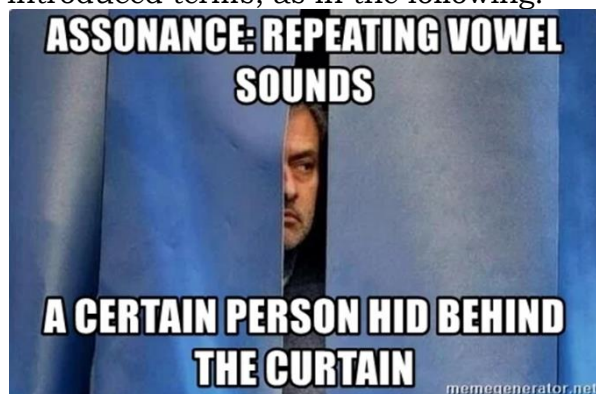

Picture 2.

Assonance is the repetition of stressed vowels, as a rule, in the words that are closely situated in the utterance, resulting in rhyme and/or euphony. In the illustration below, two vowel sounds, [e] and [eu], form rhyming lines, that end with CH**EMO** and **EMO**:

Picture 3.

In memes, rhyme holds foremost importance, being a kind of memetic tool and enhancing the virality of memes, whereas in literary discourse, a broader effect of euphony is typically sought, as exemplified by the lines from *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe: "*And the raven, never flitting, still **is** sitting, still **is** sitting...*" [18: 295].

Another discrepancy in the use of assonance in memetic discourse is the play on terms, caused by the awareness of meme creators of the exact meanings of introduced terms, as in the following:
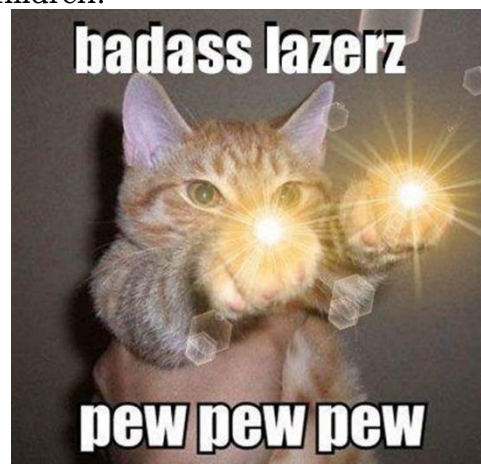

Picture 4.

Terminological awareness, speaking in general – not only stylistic-wise – is one of the distinctive features of memetic discourse. Terms from different fields are introduced in memes, often by memes, making them one of the teaching tools. Understandably so – memes are easy to remember, comfortable to store, revise and spread.

Onomatopoeia is the sound imitation of natural or artificial sounds produced by different agents, such as animals, people, inanimate objects, or natural phenomena. The example below demonstrates the imitation of shooting sounds PEW PEW PEW, often produced by children:

Picture 5.

Terminological humour is observed in memes with this stylistic device, as in the example below, where the onomatopoeic word SMACK is used alongside an explanation of its meaning: "*This is the way of onomatopoeia, Robin*":

Picture 6.

In literary works, a desired effect of onomatopoeia is frequently broader, resembling phonetic imagery, and sound instrumenting, which create an aesthetic effect or evoke an emotional response in the reader's mind, as in the lines from E. A. Poe's *The Raven*: "*And the **silken, sad, uncertain rustling** of each purple curtain...*" [18: 293].

This stylistic device is particularly powerful in poetry, helping the writer to create very bright acoustic images, as in Th. Moore's poem *Evening Bells*:

Those evening bells! Those evening bells!

How many a tale their music tells

of youth, and home and that sweet time,
When last I heard their soothing chime.

In these lines several onomatopoeic words are employed: *bells, soothing, chime,* but the general effect is greatly strengthened by other expressive means: assonance and alliteration, creating rhyme *(bells – tells*; *time – chime*), and polysyndeton (*youth,* **and** *home* **and** *that sweet time*).

Graphon is the intentional violation of the graphical shape of the word to reveal peculiarities of pronunciation based on the situation of the communicative act, the age of the speaker, her origin, education, physical or emotional state, and the like. Graphons do not prevent the reader from decoding the text correctly, but they supply additional information about the speaker. The examples show incorrect forms of the words LUVIN (the correct form is LOVING), HAZ (HAVE), and HAPPEE (HAPPY). In the first meme, *The Most Interesting Man in the World,* featuring actor Jonathan Goldsmith from the Mexican beer brand *Dos Equis* commercial, the incorrect form of the verb LOVING a non-official, casual situation of communication is revealed, which is typical for beer consumption events. In the second example, the ungrammatical forms of the verb HAVE and the adjective HAPPY imitate baby talk:
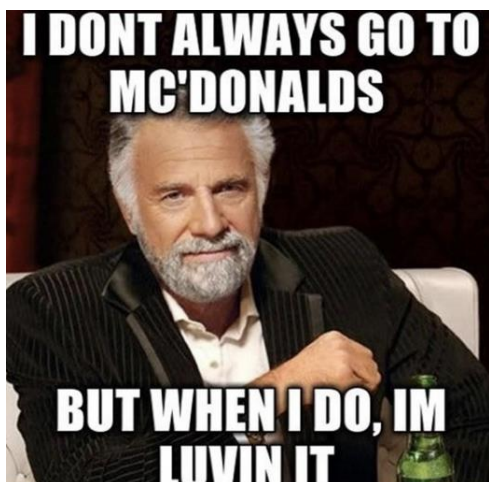
Picture 7.

Picture 8.

In literary discourse, graphons illustrate how authors use non-standard spellings to reflect accents, speech patterns, and cultural identities, bringing characters to life through their linguistic idiosyncrasies. Graphons mimic a character's speech, accent, or dialect. They are often employed to provide phonetic realism or convey sociolects, as in the passage from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights,* rendered in a thick Yorkshire dialect: "*T' maister's dahn i' t' fowld. Go rahnd by th' end ut' laith, if yah went tuh spake tull him*" [7: 13]. As a rule, graphons do not prevent the reader from an adequate understanding of the text, they just supply some additional information in a very concise form.

Change of print is the intentional introduction of parts of the text that are printed in a different style, such as italics, bold type, underscore, different colour or font. It is done in order to draw special attention to them, stressing their significance as in the example below, where the word ALWAYS is italicised:

Picture 9.

Such sections of the text gain extra significance, attracting the phrase stress and implying specific accentuated pronunciation.

Frequently, in memetic discourse, the use of this stylistic device gains its own peculiar character due to the presence of a visual component. It adds vivid illustrations to the change of print, as the decline of the runner Usain Bolt or Michael Jackson performing his famous *Moon Walk* in the examples that follow:

Picture 10.

Picture 11.

The terms naming types of script may be played on in memes. This statement may be illustrated by various pictures as in the following set, demonstrating peculiarities of *Ariel* script by *Ariel,* a Disney Mermaid figure:

Picture 12.

Capitalisation is used when the whole word or a greater part of the text is capitalised, thus making it stand out and adding logical stress to that particular part of the message, as is illustrated by the following instances, where the words SILENCE and KILL are capitalised:

Picture 13.

Picture 14.

Capitalisation functions in memetic and literary discourses are very much alike: singling out an element or elements of the text for better emphasis. A bright example of capitalization is observed in Ogden Nash's popular poem, where two words are capitalized, simultaneously being contaminated with assonance and alliteration, which results in rhyme and rhythm:

The trouble with a kitten is **THAT**
Eventually it becomes a **CAT.**

Hyphenation involves the spelling or syllable division of words to reflect peculiarities of pronunciation – such as slow, deliberate speech influenced by the speaker's psychological or physical state. In J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* there is an example where the character's speech is interrupted by hyphenation to convey a slowed-down pronunciation, suggesting hesitation or a psychological state, like the character is struggling to get

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words out: "*He was **s-l-a-i-n** in North Africa*" [16: 39]. In the example from John Steinbeck's work *Of Mice and Men*, hyphenation is used to show the character's speech pattern, which reflects his mental challenges and struggles to communicate: "***Le-ttle**, **Le-ttle**, I didn't mean no harm*" [17: 3].

Instances of hyphenation in memes are rare; however, a notable example can be found in the title of the meme, *The Persistence of **Meme-ry*** [18], which employs the wordplay on the title of Salvador Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory* with the help of paronyms *mem**o**ry* and *mem**e**ry*, the latter being an occasional word – THE PERSISTENCE OF **MEME-RY**:
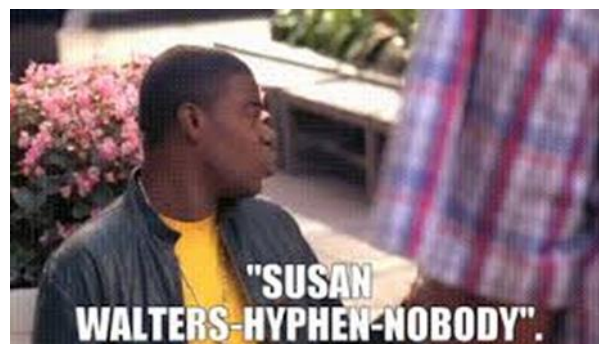

Picture 15.

A visual component as an integral part of memes allows for the creation of the linguistic play with the help of hyphens, which differs from that in literary works. In the instance below, two homonymous phrases with and without a hyphen, ONE-NIGHT STAND and ONE NIGHTSTAND, create a humorous effect, marking a discrepancy between romantic relations and a furniture piece:
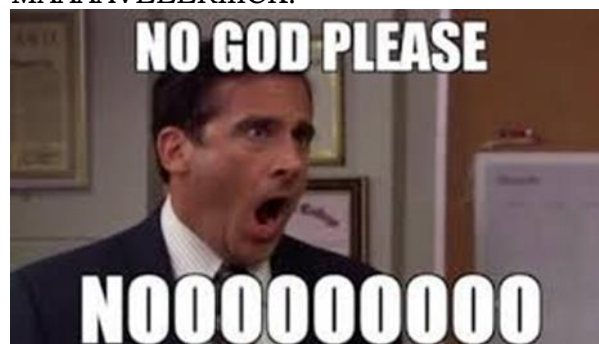

Picture 16.

We have already established terminological awareness as a distinctive feature of memetic discourse, brightly illustrated in the meme below, stressing the employment of a hyphen in WALTERS-**HYPHEN**-NOBODY (note a combination of hyphenation with another stylistic device – antonomasia):

Picture 17.

Multiplication refers to the repetition of graphemes to convey the speaker's peculiarities in pronunciation, often spiced with emotions, emphasising loud or intensified pronunciation. In the instances below, graphemes O, A, E, and I are multiplied, implying that the speakers are presumably shouting NOOOOOOOOO, MAAAAVEEERIIICK:

Picture 18.

In literary discourse, the functions of multiplication are almost the same, such as Professor Quirrell's stammering, depicted through the repetition of letters, effectively conveying peculiarities of his pronunciation, hence, his nervousness: "***P-P-P**otter,"* stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "***c-c**an't **t-t**ell you how **p-p**leased I am to meet you*" [14: 55].

Picture 19.

Layout refers to the deliberate arrangement and artistic spacing of lines designed to create a visual effect that enhances the meaning or emphasis of the message. In the context of internet memes, which primarily consist of images with textual inscriptions, the content is often structured in rows, very much like comics, to effectively convey the core idea of the message, as in the examples below:

Picture 20.

Picture 21.

In memetic discourse, this stylistic device often presents a series of images resembling a comic book, which is a distinctive influence of comic strips as part of pop culture. In the first example above, three pictures are arranged vertically, displaying the scenes from *Thor: Ragnarok* film, with Cate Blanchett playing Hela Odinsdottir and her opponent, Thor, played by Chris Hemsworth. The text also is presented in three layers:

MONDAY You can't defeat me.

ME I know, but he can.

FRIDAY

The second example is an escalating series with *Meme Man* from the Facebook group, that is also known as *Mr. Succ* and *Stonks Guy*. This 3D image is often used in surreal, absurd memes, sometimes designed in the *Panik / Kalm / Panik* setup (notable is the use of graphons in the spelling of the stages in this setup*: panic – panik, calm – kalm*). This format, as a rule, is connected with a logical twist, making it somewhat alike to a syntactical stylistic device of suspense:

You hear a Trex roar Panik

You're not watching Jurassic Park Kalm

You're not watching Jurassic Park Panik

In contrast, in literary discourse, the image is created through a structured text, as in Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrammes [1], where he creatively arranged the text of his poems to form visual shapes and patterns, often

reflecting the themes of the poems themselves, as in his iconic poem *La Colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau:*

Picture 22.

Another famous example of layout appeared in Lewis Carroll's fairy tale *Alice in Wonderland* – a tale of a tail that is presented in the form of a mouse tail:

Picture 23.

Conclusions and research prospects. As a result of our research, we have drawn certain conclusions: all nine phono-graphical stylistic devices are employed in memetic discourse but with different frequencies of trends.

The most widely used devices are **graphon**, **layout**, and **multiplication**, since they are vivid, attention-drawing, easy to comprehend. These three devices do not prevent the addressee from understanding the creator's message, being easily decipherable and modified. At the same time these devices in memetic discourse are used somewhat differently from literary discourse, as here they are less creative, less imaginative, and more illustrative.

Alliteration and **change of print** appear in memetic discourse less frequently. It may be explained by a lesser degree of vividness of the former and by a short text volume in memes.

Occasional occurrences of **capitalisation**, **onomatopoeia**, **assonance**, and **hyphenation** were also singled out. Their potential in memetic discourse is much lower for their reduced brightness.

This distribution of phono-graphical devices in memetic discourse may be accounted for by the nature of memes and their distinctive qualities: memes are aimed to be easily understood by a wide range of people, memorised, and duplicated. All this requires ease of perception and vivid appeal. The trends we have established can most likely be explained by the great influence of comic book culture. Comic book culture, which is based on a unique form of narrative as a sequence of block drawings, has its roots in medieval canons of art, such as illuminated manuscript Bibles and the Bayeux Tapestry. In memetic discourse, we can see, on the one hand, the borrowing of cultural canons – stylistic means of the literary tradition; on the other, we observe the narrative in drawings. Memes may combine these traditions, mix, remix and add something new and innovative, something that interests modern people. Here, we possibly see one of the brightest manifestations of the culture of participation, where a person is not only an observer and recipient but, at the same time, is an author, one of the creators of the newest cultural layer – memetic discourse.

Future prospects of investigation include the study of other levels of stylistic analysis in memetic discourse.

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