

**WORDPLAY IN WARTIME TWITTER COMMUNICATION:
A CASE STUDY OF UKRAINIAN POLITICIANS' HUMOROUS TWEETS**

**ГРА СЛІВ У ТВІТТЕР-КОМУНІКАЦІЇ ВОЄННОГО ЧАСУ:
НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ГУМОРИСТИЧНИХ ТВІТІВ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ПОЛІТИКІВ**

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Twitter as a powerful crisis communication tool encourages interaction between multiple parties and provides space for humour generating, functioning and sharing. This case study is a part of a larger project on wartime humour on Twitter and it examines the use of wordplay in humorous tweets of certain Ukrainian politicians. In particular, the research aims to reveal linguistic peculiarities of the authored humour which rests on the use of wordplay. The research material makes up the tweets that appeared during the first 100 days of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. All tweets were extracted, filtered according to certain criteria and organised into a sample of humorous tweets for further categorising and interpreting. The analysis of tweets produced by the Ukrainian politicians allowed us to identify the cases of wordplay being realised at the phonetic, lexical and syntactic levels, including sublevels. Thus, complete and partial homophones proved their effectiveness at the level of phonemes; paronymy and polysemy turned out to be typical instruments of wordplay at the lexical level, whereas slogan modification appeared the most productive tool for playing with words at the syntactic level. Wordplay engagement into the politicians' Twitter communication not only aims at drawing attention to the sound form, semantics or etymology of words but also to relate the utterances to particular contexts and produce an emotional impact on the recipient. This idea gets further support in terms of the multimodal character of humour expression. The results obtained in the course of interpreting humorous tweets prove that Ukrainian politicians' embedding of both positive and negative emotions into their messages contributed to producing of transmitting self-enhancing, aggressive, affiliative and inspirational humour.

Key words: wordplay, communication, Twitter, humorous tweets, Ukrainian politicians.

Твіттер як потужний інструмент кризової комунікації заохочує взаємодію між різними сторонами та створює простір для продукування, функціонування та обміну гумором. Це дослідження є частиною більшого проекту про воєнний гумор у Твіттері та розглядає використання гри слів у гумористичних твітах певних українських політиків. Зокрема, дослідження спрямоване на виявлення мовних особливостей авторського гумору, який ґрунтується на використанні гри слів. Матеріалом дослідження слугують твіти, опубліковані протягом перших 100 днів російського вторгнення в Україну у 2022 році. Вилучені твіти були уточнені за певними критеріями та структуровані у якості прикладів гумористичних твітів для подальшої класифікації та інтерпретації. Аналіз твітів українських політиків дозволив виявити випадки реалізації гри слів на фонетичному, лексичному та синтаксичному рівнях, включно з підрівнями. Так, повні та часткові омофони ефективно використовуються на рівні фонем; паронімія та полісемія виявилися типовими інструментами гри слів на лексичному рівні, тоді як модифікація слогану виявилася найпродуктивнішим інструментом гри слів на синтаксичному рівні. Залучення гри слів до твіттер-комунікації політиків має на меті не лише привернути увагу до звукової форми, семантики чи етимології слів, але й пов'язати висловлювання з певним контекстом і справити емоційний вплив на реципієнта. Ця ідея знаходить подальше підтвердження з точки зору мультимодального характеру гумористичного вираження. Результати, отримані під час інтерпретації гумористичних твітів, доводять, що використання українськими політиками як позитивних, так і негативних емоцій у своїх публікаціях сприяло виробленню трансляції самозміцнюючого, агресивного, афлілативного та надихаючого гумору.

Ключові слова: гра слів, комунікація, твітер, гумористичні твіти, українські політики.

Problem statement and state-of-the-art review.

Wordplay is deemed to be one of the most natural and widespread linguistic means of expressing humour due to the fact that it “involves the presence of (minimally) two senses, but need not involve two “words”, [1, p. 91] and, therefore, initially carries bisociation. Wordplay, and, in particular, humorous wordplay, has been a strong focus of some latest significant researches, investigated in Attardo [1], Delabastita [2], Hempelmann and Miller [3], Knospe, Onysko, and Goth [4], Winter-Froemel, Thaler, and Demeulenaere [5, 6]. Wordplay is humorous by its nature and considered to be a “historically determined phenomenon in which a speaker produces an utterance – and is aware of doing so – that juxtaposes or manipulates linguistic items from one or more languages in order to surprise the hearer(s) and obtain a humorous effect on them” [5, p. 37]. In particular, the humorous aspect is a focal point of our research since humour facilitates social interactions when sharing unpleasant information, and it “unites communicators through mutual identification and clarification of positions and values” [7, p. 310]. Communicators often resort to humour as far as they can express criticism or dissatisfaction in a socially acceptable way. Sharing humor enables the maintenance of social perceptions that transcend mutual understanding between people. Identically, Ukrainian politicians try to interact with society, convey their point of view, express criticism and finally influence the public and specific individuals by employing wordplay within social networks, namely Twitter.

Objective and tasks. The objective of the current research is to disclose linguistic peculiarities of the wordplay used as a tool of humour creation by the Ukrainian politicians in their wartime crisis communication on Twitter. The tasks of the case study are to organise a sample of humorous tweets, to categorise them according to the levels of humour coding and decoding (explicit and implicit), to select, interpret and categorise the cases of wordplay.

Data and methods. Tweets – short messages posted by Twitter users – were used as data for this research. We chose Twitter for this study not only because the number of its users continues to grow (according to a Twitter survey [8], between 2017 and 2022 it doubled at the minimum) which makes Twitter an attractive anthropocentric space for research but also because we detected a strong Twitter activity of some Ukrainian politicians, especially after the outbreak of full-scale war in February 2022. A preliminary content analysis made it possible to choose the accounts that would satisfy the needs of the study. Thus, with the help of Python

3.10 and a `twarc2`, we extracted 3727 tweets posted in the period between 24 February and 3 June 2022 which makes up 100 days of the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The sample entered the tweets from 9 Twitter accounts of Ukrainian politicians of different ranks. Targeting an overseas audience, these posts were mostly written in languages other than Ukrainian, so we concentrated on English and German as the most commonly used ones in Ukraine’s external political discourse.

After the sample was organised, we applied the elements of content and discourse analysis to detect the tweets with humorous content and interpret them. According to the levels of humour coding and decoding, we treat wordplay as a type of explicit humour. Further categorisation of wordplay in the study required the methods used within the systemic-functional approach. Thus, we applied the elements of structural, componential, semantic, stylistic and contextual analysis.

Results and discussion. Wordplay is a peculiar phenomenon. It gets realised in absolutely different discourses, contexts, and even language levels. It performs numerous functions in discourse [9, p. 51–52], most of which are social in nature. Among such functions is the realisation of humorous effect, which is in the focus of this particular study. On analysing the sample of tweets produced by the Ukrainian politicians, we found out that wordplay is actualised at the phonetic, lexical and syntactic levels of the language systems, sub-levels included.

First of all, the wordplay may be realised at the level of phonemes. In the sample arranged for this study, we found three instances of play on homophones which is the most typical case. In the tweet from April 20, 2022 S. Kyslytsa protests against recognising Russia as a UN founding member and putting it on a par with Ukraine and Belarus, and expresses his hope that “... AVOID PUTTIN’ itself in an embarrassing position”. The wordplay is technically realised by means of a deliberate shortening of the verb leading to “feigned” substantivation (`puttin` → `Putin`) and graphic capitalisation which attracts the attention of the recipient. At the level of sense and pragmatics, S. Kyslytsa calls upon saving the UN Secretary’s face by avoiding any positivation of Putin and everything related to his regime. One more example of homonymic wordplay comes from O. Reznikov:

(1) ... I’m a lawyer. For me, the rule of Law has always been a paramount value. Russia came to us with war, mass killings and looting. There is no Law for them. But, thanks to our partners, (Flag of Ukraine) has NLaw for them. This special kind of "love" will

inevitably win. Thank to #AviatsiyaHalychyny [one image attached]

(Oleksii Reznikov, Apr 18, 2022)

The humorous effect in (1) is achieved by utilising the interplay between the homonymic constituents of the anthesis: crime (no law) and punishment (NLaw). Interestingly, the wordplay rolls further and engages another pair of partial homonyms: the Minister of Defence of Ukraine calls ‘NLaw’ a special kind of ‘love’ to Russian invaders. O. Reznikov’s sarcasm reaches its zenith as he attaches the image featuring a fantasy animal with an NLaw in hand and the inscription “From Ukraine with NLaw”. In terms of the language material engaged in the wordplay, the second case goes somewhat beyond homonymy as the phonetic composition of ‘NLaw’ and ‘love’ differ greatly yet the wordplay may still be caught.

A transitive case merging the levels of phonemes and lexemes is the use of semi-rooted words for creating wordplay. The phenomenon called paronymy is observed in this discursive fragment:



(2)

Commenting on the SPD’s indignation at V. Zelensky’s refusal to welcome F.-W. Steinmeier in Kyiv in April 2022, A. Melnyk neatly notes: “Those who have not been invited can’t be deprived of the invitation”. In German, he craftily gets use of the wordplay realised by the verb pair *einladen* / *ausladen*. On the one hand, the paronyms touch the auditory domain so far the similarity of word forms creates a pleasant sound effect. On the other hand, the form of negative-positive restatement, which is considered a type of repetition, adds to the ironic effect and makes A. Melnyk’s mocking memorable.

On entering the level of lexemes, we immediately come across the most frequent type of wordplay which is based on polysemy. A good example of such provides M. Podolyak:

(3) Leaders of pro-Russian criminal enclaves claim that they want to make Mariupol a resort on the Sea of Azov. Tens of thousands killed. Hundreds of thousands lost homes. Want to sunbathe on the beach? Ukrainian special services will issue a personal "hot tour" to everyone.

(Mykhailo Podolyak, May 18, 2022)

The irony involved in the tweet (3) is realised by the complex of a rhetorical question and wordplay. Rhetorical question separates the informative and the emotional parts of the tweet and marks the opposition that bears irony, – human sacrifice vs recreation, – whereas the polysemantic unit *hot tour* features the clash of the explicit and implicit meanings: instead of the touristic attractions of Mariupol the invaders and collaborators are promised a severe resistance from the Ukrainian army thanks to the heavy weapons to be obtained from the foreign partners in the nearest future. The tweet offers aggressive humour and can be treated as sarcastic bordering on black humour that reproaches, urges and threatens.

In online communication on the web, wordplay through polysemy may be triggered non-verbally and here is the case from A. Melnyk:

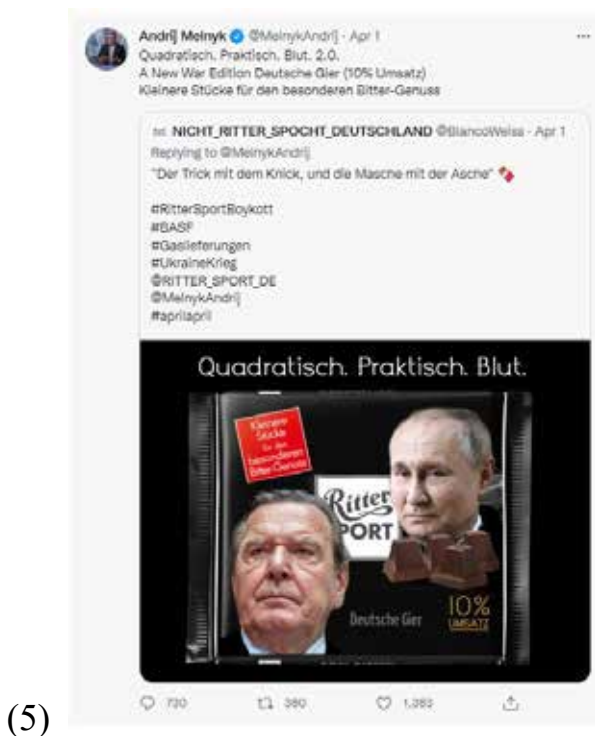


(4)

The tweet features the photo of W. Putin and S. Gabriel, the then newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, during his first visit to Russia in this status in 2017. Already then, he was ranked among “Putin-Emphasizers” (*Putin-Versteher* in German) for his ardent desire “to fix” the relationships between Moscow and Berlin. Since 2022, he has not abandoned this idea and continues to shield the Kremlin in his narratives. Thus, S. Gabriel appeared on the list of German pundits severely criticised by A. Melnyk. This particular A. Melnyk’s tweet is extremely laconic: he simply calls “priceless” the flirtatious looks that the top-politicians exchange in the photo. The Macmillan Dictionary suggests such an entry for the lexeme *priceless*: 1) very valuable and impossible to replace, 2) extremely useful in helping you to achieve something, 3) (mainly spoken) extremely funny [10]. By means of polysemy, A. Melnyk gives his readers a chance to play with the meaning of the word and the sense of the message. At the same time, he obviously mocks the “extreme value” of these relationships and the “funniness” of denying their existence or impact.

A. Melnyk’s account features a whole series of posts dedicated to the “case of liver sausage”. In early May 2022, A. Melnyk reproached the German chancellor, who declined a visit to Kyiv, for behaving like an “offended liver sausage” (namely, he used the German set phrase *beleidigte Leberwurst spielen*) which was not statesmanlike. The incident caused a lot of criticism toward A. Melnyk and he decided to apologise in the aftermath. However, the incident has also given rise to a fully anecdotal story about one German butcher who got use of the wordplay (liver sausage as a kind of sausage vs an [offended] person) and supported A. Melnyk by sending him his liver sausage “to convince” the ambassador that liver sausage is not that bad. The humorous move was warmly welcome and the butcher even got an invitation to the Ukrainian embassy in Berlin.

Among the forms of wordplay at the syntactic level used by the Ukrainian politicians is slogan modification. First, here belong the slogans authored by someone else but shared by Ukrainian politicians not only to amuse but also to attract the recipients’ attention, to build the feeling of unanimity, to cheer up or to criticise. Below are two tweets incorporating modified slogans. Let us consider two examples:



(5)

In (5), A. Melnyk reposts the modified version of the *Ritter Sport* slogan *Quadratisch. Praktisch. Blut* (originally “Quadratisch. Praktisch. Gut”) and quotes the post by @BlancoWeiss, thus, sharing another humorous modification *Der Trick mit dem Knick und die Masche mit der Asche* (originally “Tasche”)

which means “The pack with the snap that’s the packet in the ashes” (originally “pocket”) in English. The verbal humour applied in the tweet borders on black humour which is a powerful tool for voicing sharp criticism towards those who neglect the overall principles of humanism.



(6)

Another slogan was used by A. Gerashchenko in (6). It is a type of re-modified one: “May the Force be with you” → “May the 4th be with you” → *May the 4th be with Ukraine* and can be considered a co-authored case of humouring. The wordplay rests on the phonetic closeness of the words *force* and *fourth* and the phonetic identity of the initial verb and noun. This is an example of self-enhancing multimodal humour where the allusive poster, featuring main antagonists and protagonists, perfectly embeds the slogan into the context of today’s Ukraine and adds to creating the ironic effect.

At the same time, the sample features an example of a self-tailored modification of a slogan:

(7) On behalf of the President Zelenskyy I’m honored to pass the first Ukraine’s peace prize to @Google @Karan_K_Bhatia. Our small express of gratitude. Company proved its bravery and devotion to freedom. As Ukrainians do every single day. Google stands for Ukraine! Just google it (winking face). [one photo attached]

(Mykhailo Fedorov, May 25, 2022)

The humorous note effectively crowns the message that informs about the positive developments in the information space. It features a witty use of wordplay with Nike’s slogan *Just do it* for a comical effect. Alongside, it is a good example of affiliative and inspirational humour.

Conclusions. Wordplay in the most general sense refers to “playing” with language material that leads

to realising humorous effect. Regarding the levels of humour coding and decoding in a message, it belongs to the explicit means of humour creation as it shows systemic actualisations, i.e. at different language levels, sublevels included. At the phonemic level, wordplay is typically reached by the involvement of complete and partial homophones. Paronyms and polysemantic units are among regular forms of wordplay at the level of lexemes. This study also proved that slogan modification is probably the most popular tool for playing with words at the syntactic level.

At the same time, understanding a wordplay in the context requires some extralinguistic knowledge which makes wordplay a tricky phenomenon when beyond the language system. The functions of wordplay in discourse are numerous; however, in the context of wartime crisis communication its main functions are to entertain, to cheer up and to criticise by mocking. Thus, wordplay proves its multipurpose nature for humour realisation and a great potential within all humour styles (affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing) used in wartime Twitter communication.

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