

CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING INTERNET MEMES INTO ENGLISH

In the digital era, internet memes have become a popular form of communication and cultural expression. Memes combine verbal and visual elements to create humorous, ironic, or emotional messages that spread rapidly through social media platforms. Due to their multimodal and culture-specific nature, translating internet memes into English presents numerous linguistic and cultural challenges.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the main difficulties of translating internet memes into English and examine the strategies used to preserve humor, meaning, and communicative effect.

One of the major challenges is the translation of culture-specific references. Many memes contain local symbols, historical associations, or nationally marked expressions that may be unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences. For example, the Ukrainian meme phrase “Паляниця перевірку пройшов” appeared during the Russian-Ukrainian war as a marker of national identity. A literal translation, “He passed the palianytsia test,” may be unclear for foreign readers because the symbolic meaning of the word “паляниця” is lost. Therefore, a more effective adaptation is “He proved he was truly Ukrainian,” which preserves the communicative intention and cultural implication.

Another significant difficulty is the translation of slang and internet-specific vocabulary. Modern memes frequently use informal expressions that may not have direct equivalents in English. For instance, the Ukrainian slang word “крінж” originates from English internet culture and can be translated directly as “cringe.” However, depending on the context, translators may also choose variants such as “painfully awkward” to sound more natural in standard English communication.

Wordplay and irony also create serious translation problems. Political and social memes often rely on emotionally charged contrasts or culturally recognizable expressions. A common Ukrainian meme phrase “Зрада чи перемога?” literally translates as “Betrayal or victory?” Nevertheless, English meme discourse usually prefers more expressive internet language; therefore, the adapted version “Is this a total fail or a huge win?” better reflects the humorous tone of the original meme.

In addition, meme translation depends heavily on visual-verbal interaction. The humorous effect is often created through the combination of image and caption. For example, the meme caption “Я після трьох хвилин навчання” accompanied by a picture of an exhausted cat can be effectively translated as “Me after three minutes of studying.” This translation preserves the internationally recognizable meme structure “Me after...,” which is common in English-speaking online communities.

Translators also face difficulties with nationally specific situations and emotional context. During periods of power outages in Ukraine, memes such as “Коли відключили світло, але є павербанк” became widespread online. A literal translation sounds unnatural, while the adapted English version “When the blackout starts but your power bank saves the day” successfully preserves both humor and emotional expressiveness.

To overcome these challenges, translators use strategies such as adaptation, localization, paraphrasing, and cultural substitution. In meme translation, preserving the communicative effect and emotional response is often more important than maintaining literal accuracy. As a result, translators must combine linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and creativity.

In conclusion, translating internet memes into English is a complex intercultural process influenced by language, culture, humor, and digital communication practices. Effective meme translation aims to preserve not only lexical meaning but also emotional impact, irony, and social context. Therefore, internet meme translation can be considered an important aspect of modern digital linguistics and intercultural communication.

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