

“THE GENERAL SAID” : A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 MEMES OF GENERAL MUTAFCHIIYSKI

Desislava CHESHMEDZHIEVA-STOYCHEVA
Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen

Abstract: *Starting from the premise that internet memes are units carrying cultural information and the fact that they are usually ideological as well as intertextual in nature, the paper provides an analysis of a corpus of memes featuring General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, the Chair of the National Crisis Management Staff during the first wave of COVID-19. The memes were circulated in social media, mostly Facebook, between 13 March and 30 May, 2020. In order to analyze the general ideas that users in Bulgaria saw as humorous in the presentation of the new crisis and to find the underlying ideology and the intertextual references employed to that end, the paper resorts to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as well as CDA, the former being preferred when analysis of verbal and non-verbal means of expression is required, while the latter is used in matters that touch on ideology and the way it is related to a particular social reality. Some of the main conclusions reached are that the image of General Mutafchiyski is presented through various intertextual references to events, artists (both Bulgarian and international), fairy tales, movies, even aliens, for the sake of providing a general idea of his position in the fight against COVID-19. Despite the humorous effect, the image of the general is predominantly positive and shows the respect of the authors behind the memes circulating in social media at the time.*

Keywords: *internet memes, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, COVID-19, MDA, CDA*

Introduction

In 2020 people experienced a form of evil few have encountered in their lifetime, a new kind of plague that struck indiscriminately. The whole world shivered and was quiet in the face of Covid-19. This trend and the emotions experienced during the first onslaught have been felt on and off with different degrees of force until today. People get literally bombarded with information of various kinds – experts on various media outlets provide information about the disease, others advise us on how to protect ourselves, still others argue that the whole thing is just another conspiracy theory that will eventually go away and the truth it was intended to hide would be revealed. Regardless of the stand taken, the load of information is mind-boggling. In order to maintain one’s peace of mind and have a different look at the virus, the social media responded to the scare and panic caused by some with various jokes that showed the other side of the coin – the humorous one.

Humor is one of the safest and easiest outlets for tension and fear as it is relatable, i.e. people in social media easily relate to each other when they find similar things to laugh at. Although humor and the laughter resulting from it can be taken as universal, it can also be culture-specific, as some of the things people belonging to a particular culture laugh at might not be considered funny by members of other groups (see Eagleton 10). This is even more true when it comes to memes, as they themselves are “units of cultural information” (*TheFreeDictionary*; Dawkins), thereby culturally bound.

Like humor, which is an essential characteristic of most memes, the latter are also closely related to intertextuality (Shifman; Wiggins). Put in simple terms, intertextuality postulates that no text can be viewed in isolation as a unique structure but can be related to various other previously created texts through various strategies (references to characters, use of specific headlines, allusions, quotes, epigraphs, etc.) and thus its significance can be understood better (see Kristeva; Fairclough; Shifman; Todorova; Wiggins).

Additionally, a meme is also ideologically bound (Shifman; Wiggins) or it transmits special messages and shows how an issue or a problem should be perceived. Generally, ideology is defined as “a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy” as well as a system of beliefs (Cranston) which, according to Van Dijk, should not be by default negative, nor is it exclusively tied up with dominance and the fact that it is a social construct and does not function individually. Thus, it can be said that memes also provide the opportunity for “political and social expression” (Aronson and Jaffal).

Previous research on the topic

The topic is a multifaceted one as, on the one hand, we have the media coverage of disease, or, in this case, a global pandemic using one particular genre, i.e. the internet meme, which is also defined as digital humor (see Dynel 176) itself, while on the other, the employment of puns and jokes and the general theory on humor. Having in mind the vastness of both fields, it should be explicitly stated that the analysis presented here is by no means exhaustive and can be used as the starting point for other research in the field.

The study appears as a natural follow-up on the employment of internet memes in the time of COVID-19 and as such takes into consideration previous research in the field, such as the general theory on memes put forward first by Richard Dawkins, and further elaborated for internet memes by Limor Shifman and Bradley Wiggins. Both Shifman and Wiggins have greatly contributed to the theoretical base of internet meme analysis delving into issues such as the main characteristics of memes (Shifman; Wiggins), their generic uniqueness and variety (Shifman; Wiggins), the distinction between memes and virals (Shifman), and afterwards providing analysis on different groups of memes,

such as political memes (Shifman; Wiggins), on the commercial use of memes (Wiggins), on the audience of memes and ways of understanding them (Wiggins) as well as on memes as a form of art (Wiggins).

Some of the more specific studies resorted to in this paper touch upon COVID-19 memes in particular. An example of the latter is “Mememes of the virus: social criticism of the corona pandemic on the internet” by Kevin Pauliks, who summarizes some of the main views on memes, starting with Dawkins and the differences observed between the Dawkinsian meme and the internet meme. Pauliks then analyzes several different Covid-related memes starting with those defining the role of China in the spread of the virus. He also analyses memes on intergenerational differences and the blame game between baby boomers and millennials or zoomers on who is responsible for climate change and the fact that the planet eventually took its revenge on them through the virus. Pauliks also analyses memes that criticize panic buying during the pandemic as well as those that criticize capitalism and more specifically the devaluation of the life of the single person.

In her analysis “COVID-19 memes going viral: On the multiple multimodal voices behind face masks,” Martha Dynel looks into the different voices employed in mask memes and reaches the conclusion that during their multiple reposting the voice of the author / poster / subject of a meme “can be repurposed or unwittingly distorted” and can sometimes even be lost.

“Online Memes and COVID-19” by Michael G. Flaherty and Cosima Rughinis focuses on the collective reflection on self and time during the pandemic as expressed through the “I want a haircut” meme.

Meanwhile, in Russia ...: Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video is another interesting piece of research in which Eliot Borenstein dedicates a whole chapter to COVID-19 memes used in that particular country, in addition to an overview of the general perception of memes in Russia. The author concludes that as Russian experience and history are quite different from those of Western Europe, the sources used in pandemic memes are also different, in most cases bearing reference to the 1990s, the so-called “Wild 90s” which mark the fall of the USSR. The latter is mostly due to the fact that the younger generation, a demographic which usually produces the majority of the memes circulating across social media, is visually aware of that particular period of hardship and can use it as a reference for the present-day pandemic situation. There are also other typically Russian references that are used, related to political life, poetry, cartoons, among others.

“Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens: Generational Humor, Identity, and Conflict During the Pandemic” by Pamela Aronson and Islam Jaffal analyses memes developed by emerging adults in order to study their perception of the pandemic. The authors use content analysis and define three main topics that are employed, i.e. “pandemic humor, generational identity humor, and

generational conflict humor”. Additionally, they comment on the subthemes that emerged and the existing “shared generational identity” established mainly through shared experiences related to education, everyday life, relationships, and others.

While international research on COVID-19 related memes is booming, analysis on Bulgarian memes as such is scarce; however, there are some studies that should be mentioned as being close to the topic at hand. Dafina Genova, for example, traces out the main characteristics of internet memes compared to the abovementioned general notion put forward by Richard Dawkins. Her focus is on the genre and structural specificities of memes as a means of online communication.

The other two studies conducted by Bulgarian scholars and used as a background to this analysis focus on Covid-19 memes. Ivanka Mavrodieva analyses memes of the pandemic published in the same period as the one selected here. She reviews them through the prism of intertextuality, hypertextuality and multimodality. Similarly, she also analyses the images used in those memes and comes to the conclusion that there are usually popular figures that are used to foster easier decoding. At the same time, Mavrodieva’s research shows that in most of the cases the image does not contribute to the understanding of the meme, which differs from the conclusions reached in this analysis.

Angelina Ilieva in her study “The General, his fandom, and a participatory pandemic” explores the phenomenon of (anti-)fandom in reference to the image of General Mutafchiyski as created by the media. The author introduces the term “participatory pandemic” (71) to refer to the public response to the pandemic in Bulgaria. Ilieva has also found out that due to the presentation the general enjoyed there was a culture of fandom created around his persona. This culture displayed all the characteristic stages of fandom and the latter can be traced out in the mediatic employment of memes on Mutafchiyski.

Finally, it should be mentioned that although research on memes by Bulgarian scholars is not so prolific, memes are being created in Bulgaria as we speak and there are whole sites dedicated to them that show the creativity of Bulgarian meme-generators. Therefore, the analysis herewith, although not exhaustive and covering all aspects of meme analysis, is a humble contribution to the general research on the topic.

Corpus and Methods of Analysis

In this paper I intend to adhere to the definition of internet meme provided by Bradley Wiggins as it most comprehensively combines its essence, function, and general environment (11):

The internet meme is hereby defined as a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity. [...] Its function is to posit an argument, visually, in order to commence, extend, counter, or influence a discourse. Naturally this can occur within humorous contexts; however, humor is merely the surface-level entry point for social salience. Digging deeper, one can view the argument within the meme which is usually if not always representative of an ideological practice.

The definition provided by Wiggins also summarizes the goal of the paper, namely to trace the intertextual references used in Covid-19 memes on General Mutafchiyski and in addition to analyze the underlying ideas conveyed through them. Due to the restrictions of space and in order to be able to provide a more comprehensive analysis, the paper will only focus on image macro memes related to the first lockdown Bulgaria experienced in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. All the memes analyzed have as their subject one particular figure from that period – Major-General Prof. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, MD, DSc, FACS. The reason for selecting that particular figure is because at that time his name and image were most frequently connected with the fight against the pandemic as he was the Chairperson of the National Crisis Management Staff (NCMS) from 24 February 2020 to May 2020. The majority of the jokes analyzed are in Bulgarian as the source of the memes is the personal account of the author and they have been shared among the contacts in the author’s contact list.

A Google search revealed considerably more General Mutafchiyski memes, which confirms the popularity of the image. Furthermore, the memes featuring the general that have been shared, commented on and reacted to on Facebook and Instagram have been remixed, altered, and constantly “upgraded” to provide the variety and variation which Shifman posits as main characteristics of memes (Shifman; see also Wiggins). The fact that they revolve around one and the same image highlights another basic characteristic of memes, namely their group character, i.e. they build up clusters of similar macro images.

The general batch of 84 memes has been subdivided into several groups based on the characters / subjects involved: 1) memes featuring only the general – 4 memes; 2) memes quoting Mutafchiyski’s words or bearing reference to him but lacking his image – 2 memes; 3) Mutafchiyski vs Bulgarian figures (artists, writers, etc.) – 55 memes; 4) Mutafchiyski vs representatives of other cultures, including extraterrestrials – 22 memes; 5) Mutafchiyski and other Bulgarian officials involved in the fight against the pandemic – 1 meme. Such grouping fosters ease of analysis as there are various

similarities, even visual, involved in the creation of the memes, which only confirms the idea of remixing and grouping.

The questions this study aims to answer are:

- What is the general image of Mutafchiyski that is being created?
- What is the underlying message that memes carry and how should that be understood within the existing ideology?

By answering these questions, the paper provides an analysis of both the form and stance¹ of image macros in compliance with Wiggins' perception of their merging (see Wiggins 17). As the subject at hand includes multiple codes (see Hall) being transferred online, the methods of analysis are critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough) along with multimodal discourse analysis (see Wong) and have been applied to a smaller sample of 12 image macros presented below.

Analysis

General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski became a very popular figure during the first wave of COVID-19 in Bulgaria. As mentioned above, he was appointed Chairperson of the National Crisis Management Staff (NCMS) on 24 February 2020. He started appearing on briefings of the NCMS several times a day and was known for his unwavering position on social distancing, isolation, and protection, and later on vaccination as the main means of combatting the pandemic. Even though he had some staunch opponents, his word was heard and the ruling party followed his advice, leading to the signature phrase “The General said”, which also became the name of a Facebook group that published jokes, memes, and posters that had him as their main subject.

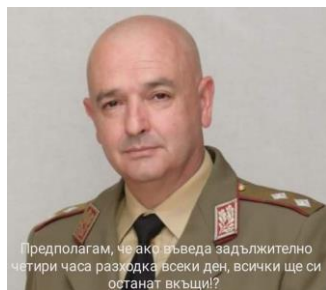
Memos featuring only the general

The memes in this group consist only of the image of the general and help recipients hear his voice. This is probably the group that provides the most comprehensive image of the general as there are no other images he has been compared to.

The four memes are quite different and should be analyzed separately as they focus on different aspects of his role as the chairperson of NCMS. As stated above, Mutafchiyski was in charge of the daily briefings and was the chief consultant when it came to the implementation of various measures or prohibitions during the first wave of the pandemic. Many of the restrictions proposed by him were met with suspicion and not many Bulgarians were ready to comply. Thereby, the verbal element in the first meme in this analysis employs reverse psychology.

¹ As stated by Wiggins (17), “Content is the information, the data which the meme conveys. Stance is the deliberation on how that content should be (ideally) understood and which (imagined) audiences are addressed and which are ignored, marginalized, etc.”

(1)²



Were I to impose a four-hour walk a day, I suppose you would all stay home!?

It is a typical macro image featuring a medium-sized shot of the general staring directly at the camera in full uniform. There is no background, so the focus is only on the face of the general, who looks welcoming and smiling. The verbal part is related to the various restrictions he imposed as chairperson of NCMS, initially met with skepticism and unwillingness to obey. His image is placed on top of words which he did not actually say, so in a way his voice was repurposed (see Dynel) by the author or poster of the meme in order to present a strategy that might have been more productive than the one actually employed. It is a kind of reverse psychology reminiscent of the word games parents usually play with naughty children in order to make them behave themselves, namely telling an obstinate child to do exactly the thing they have been initially forbidden to do. Children led by their desire to oppose the parent end up doing exactly what they initially refused to do. Thus, the verbal part reminds one of a short exchange between a parent and a child along the lines of “Don’t go out!” “I will!” “OK, go outside!” “No, I won’t” and summarizes the attitude some Bulgarians exhibit to Mutafchiyski’s orders – disobedience.

In the same line of thought, it could also be concluded that Mutafchiyski has been attributed the role of the protective parent looking after his children, which corresponds to the metaphor frequently employed in political discourse describing the relationship between a political leader and the other members of society. The parent is kind, nurturing but also administers punishments when needed (see Lakoff). This idea is transferred to the structure of society and applied to analyze the behavior of different societal organizations and structures.

The idea of punishment is employed in the next meme that features the image of the general alone. In March there was a fine of 5,000 BGN imposed on those who did not stay under quarantine (it was approximately three times the average salary at the time). The expression of Gen. Mutafchiyski in that meme is not as welcoming as in [1]. He is leaning forward, slightly tilted to the left, looking very serious and staring the audience directly in the eyes over his

² The translations of the verbal elements in the memes belong to the author.

glasses as if reprimanding them or at least showing that he is dead serious about his decision.



(2)

The new note is of a denomination that does not exist in Bulgarian currency but the image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and the imposed fine link the note to the policy followed by the chairperson of the NCMS in fighting the virus. It could even be hypothesized that the symbol on the note to the right of the image of the general is a stylized representation of the Corona virus with its round shape and bulbous nodes. The banknote meme very ingeniously links the fine through its explicit presentation, first in numbers and then in words, the name and face of the general, the year and the symbolic representation of the virus, and all of them jointly convey the message as to when, what and who, i.e. when the virus struck, what one of the measures was, and who imposed it. Whether deliberately or not, the author of the meme placed Mutafchiyski among the people who have made a contribution to Bulgarian culture and history³, thus reconfirming his significance in the current crisis.

The third meme in this group is actually a remix of the poster of the movie *Jumanji: The next level*, which came out in 2019. In this meme Mutafchiyski has adopted the body of Dwayne Johnson's character in the movie, i.e. Dr. Xander "Smolder" Bravestone.

(3)



Congratulations! You reached the month of May! Welcome to level two of the pandemic!

Like Mutafchiyski, Dr. Bravestone is a scholar; he is an archeologist and an adventurer, as well as the leader of his group, which is another characteristic that reciprocates those of Gen. Mutafchiyski.

The latter is presented once again staring directly at the camera and the audience, looking over his glasses, and once again he appears to be very

³ The portraits currently adorning Bulgarian banknotes belong to people who have left their mark on Bulgarian history and culture, for example Ivan Milev – an artist, Peter Beron – a very famous Bulgarian scholar who wrote the first textbook in Bulgarian, Aleko Konstantinov – a famous Bulgarian writer who wrote *To Chicago and Back*, etc.

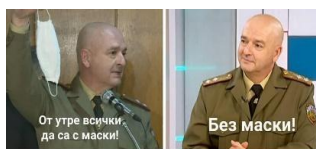
serious. The verbal component that is placed at the bottom of the meme is again attributed to the general with the intention of conveying the notion of survival: the first stage of the pandemic is over and people or at least the recipients of the message have made it through the first most difficult wave of COVID-19. The verbal part also intertextually refers to the title of the movie – “The next level”, and thus establishes another link between the fictitious reality and the Bulgarian pandemic, which is also perceived as a kind of game. This could come to explain the way many people felt about the whole situation – as if it was something unreal, a dream one would wake up from, or, as suggested in the meme, a game that would eventually end. In another intertextual reference to the movie though, one becomes aware of the fact that a game does not simply end on its own but it is through the efforts of the players that the game is won or lost. This could come to suggest that the game of COVID-19 could finish only as a result of the joint efforts of all the people, i.e. players, involved.

In the game, the team of characters led by Dr. Bravestone are on a quest to save one of their own, while in Bulgaria Prof. Mutafchiyski was on the difficult quest to save as many of his fellow countrymen as possible. The image created is that of a tough guy who would not have anyone oppose him. Considering the way he handled the first wave of the pandemic, we can say that he was really tough, regardless of the negativity many of the measures were met with.

The various decisions passed by the government are presented in a meme which comprises a remix of six different images of Gen. Mutafchiyski along with the different orders he issued. The meme is arranged in such a way that the statements on the left are presented as opposing those on the right in the first four shots:

(4)

Masks on starting tomorrow!



No masks!

Masks on!



No masks!

With or without masks?



Why do you even listen to this guy?

The last two images were very carefully selected by the author of the meme to show Mutafchiyski in a reflective mood in the one on the left, thus matching the Shakespearean dilemma repositioned in a new pandemic setting, namely “With or without masks?”, and the more decisive looking image on the right which shares the opinion of a large group of Bulgarians at the time: “Why do you even listen to this guy?”. Thus, it can be stated that the remix creates a schizophrenic image of the general as one who is lost in his own decisions and has started talking about himself in the third person. In this respect, this is one of the few memes that ridicule his orders. It can also be hypothesized that the meme also reflects the confusion felt by a segment of society in following the orders given, although in the meme the sequence seems to happen faster than in reality.

Mememes quoting Mutafchiyski’s words or bearing reference to him but lacking his image

(5)

You don’t eat or sleep, you have dark circles under your eyes... I know what you are!

Say it out loud, Bella!

You are... a fan of Mutafchiyski’s and follow all his briefings



The first meme from this group is a remix of dialogue from a very popular teenage movie that came out in 2008 about the romantic relationship between a male vampire and a human girl. The images used to compose the macro are taken from the *Twilight* movie scene when Bella (Kristen Stewart) realizes what Edward (Robert Pattinson) is. Part of the original lines delivered by Bella are retained and they deepen the intertextual link further. The description of a vampire at least partially comes to fit the description of a considerable part of Bulgarian society that followed the briefings aired on Bulgarian national television several times a day, even at midnight. For people who had nothing much to do during a lockdown watching TV was a natural choice but this had a negative effect on their mental state and appearance. Mutafchiyski himself looked visibly tired towards the end of the briefing marathon of a month or so. The humorous effect is achieved through the intertextual link between a popular movie and a popular figure and the fact that one cannot easily relate

the two. However, the author of the meme exploited a trait that could be used to establish the connection, i.e. personal appearance. So, even though the subject of the meme is not explicitly portrayed, the recipients get a sense of his diligence and continuous efforts to keep society informed.

Mutafchiyski vs Bulgarian figures (artists, writers, etc.)

The memes in this group are the most numerous. They can, however, be further subdivided into groups in terms of their arrangement and the people / characters shown in the complementing image. Thus, the general structure of the memes in this group is a combination of two or more images arranged one on top of the other, the one with the general occupying the lower part of the image. The general has the final say in most of the memes and the words attributed to him are suggestive of the restrictions imposed.

In many of the memes the general is presented as one of the parties in a conversational exchange. As stated above, the position he is assigned makes him the authority that speaks out last and thus has the final say. Mutafchiyski's conversational partners are usually Bulgarian singers, historical figures, characters from fairy tales or simply common people. The short exchanges are usually connected with the distance people should keep, the need to be placed under quarantine when entering the country, the times people could visit food stores, etc. Thus, these memes are developed on the basis of the multiple voices attributed to various subjects of Bulgarian origin.

The range of artists used varies from icons, such as Emil Dimitrov or Lili Ivanova, who are better known by the older generation, to Giordano and Mihaela Fileva and Grafa, who are contemporary music stars.

(6)



I have stayed awake so many nights, I have walked so many paths just to come back

Now you'll get two whole weeks of sleep

In (6) the verbal part is the first verse delivered by a famous Bulgarian singer Emil Dimitrov. The song “My Country, My Bulgaria” (Моя страна, моя България) is a confession of the love an immigrant feels for their home country and is therefore frequently sung by Bulgarian immigrants abroad. The song was written in 1970 in France on the birth of Emil Dimitrov's son. The image of the singer is from his early years and is probably taken from a TV program.

Therefore, the meme is a remix of past and present in which the desire of the lyrical subject to come back is repositioned to match a pandemic reality in which quarantine and social distance was the norm. The imagined response of the general is in unison with the measures imposed and this actually creates the humorous effect. It is more than obvious that an exchange such as the one quoted is not possible as Emil Dimitrov had passed away long before the pandemic hit and before Mutafchiyski was appointed as the head of the “onset” against it.

All these memes, albeit in a humorous way, uphold the authority of the general as he is presented as the expert in all fields. At the same time, the memes reflect his philosophy and line of behavior during the first wave of the pandemic. Just as he was adamant on the need for stricter measures, social distancing and lockdown, he was also very cautious in his predictions and did not succumb to optimism readily.

The latter ideology is reflected in a humorous way as a response to the exclamation of one of the biggest Bulgarian celebrities in show business, later turned political leader Slavi Trifonov, who is presented during one of his concerts shouting out loud a verse from a Bulgarian-Roma song.

(7)



Spring has exploded, but we haven't!

It's too early to tell!

This is about the advent of spring and uses a Bulgarian polysemantic word which, on the one hand, signifies the blooming of spring flowers, while on the other can be used colloquially to signify one's death. Thus, through a play on words, the verse states that spring has come, and we have not died and are still alive. The response of the general intertextually links the time of the year and the outbreak of the pandemic to Bulgarian lore, shifting from the expectations of new life and new beginning usually associated with spring to the pandemic reality where the number of the deceased was on the rise and Mutafchiyski kept saying that we were about to face a drastic increase, so we were merely at the low end of the curve.

In this meme, the authors, whoever they may be, actually quoted some of the general's words. The quote was taken from a public appearance on 18

March 2020, while the first use of the meme is noted on 21 March 2020, which actually coincides with the first day of spring.

The memes in this group touch on various aspects of Bulgarian life as the top position is taken not only by Bulgarian artists but also by characters from history, children's nursery rhymes, or other events and celebrations characteristic of Bulgarian culture and customs.

It could be stated that in this section all the memes are cultural units that carry specific cultural codes as both the verbal and the non-verbal part of the memes are markedly Bulgarian. Bulgarian is considered a language of the periphery from an international point of view, so its audience is restricted. The images used are also typically Bulgarian, being related to Bulgarian culture and history. As such, it could be assumed that the intended recipients of the memes are only Bulgarians.

Mutafchiyski vs representatives of other cultures, including extraterrestrials

In this section the memes are composed on a similar principle, i.e. a remix of one meme which features a famous international artist, a movie scene, a character from a fairy tale, or supernatural beings placed in the upper part of the meme and the image of Mutafchiyski at the bottom.

In all the memes, the opposition is of the kind observed in those analyzed in the previous section; namely, if there is even a hint of running away, going out or simply going somewhere, the general responds with a prohibition.

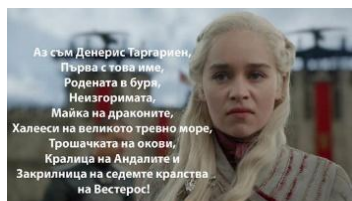
The interesting thing in terms of composition here is the use of both English and Bulgarian in some of the memes (English is generally used by the foreigner, while the responses delivered by the general are in Bulgarian), while in other memes English is used in both speech acts. The reason behind the switch between the two languages is difficult to explain, although a possible explanation could be the desire to show that Mutafchiyski is proficient in English as well, which actually is the case, as can be seen from his CV, while another one could be that the Bulgarian rules are applicable and could be imposed in other countries as well. The latter suggestion seems to be more plausible and also supports the image of the general as an authority to be listened to and a superhero of the caliber of Dr. Bravestone, whom no one dares disobey.

A group of memes presents remixes of the popular GOT series. A couple of them focus on the ban on going out and the way Mutafchiyski just plainly orders the Night King and his army of white walkers to go back. There are, however, two memes that feature another very important character in the *Game of Thrones* series – Queen Daenerys I Targaryen. In both images, Daenerys appears to be challenging her opponent's authority by sharing all her titles. In the first one, she presents herself as Daenerys Targaryen, Stormborn, of the House Targaryen, Mother of Dragons, The Unburnt, Queen of Meereen.

Names are important in establishing one's identity and position in society. By sharing all her titles, Daenerys also shares her history and the achievements that have shaped her as a person. All these titles also aim to intimidate her opponent and one can see that the worthier the opponent, the longer the titles. Thus, during the first encounter with the Dragon Queen, Mutafchiyski styles himself as “Major General, Professor, military doctor Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Director at the Military Medical Academy (MMA), Head of the National Operational Headquarters for Fight with the Coronavirus Pandemic in Bulgaria, part of the Cabinet” and at the end finishes off with a colloquial expression characteristic of the North-West “What's with her” in a diminutive fashion showing that Daenerys cannot outtrump him. The final expression used is so colloquial in nature that it can be stated that it is not something that would come out of his mouth.

In meme (8) The Dragon Queen introduces herself as Daenerys Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Stormborn, The Unburnt, Mother of Dragons, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains, Queen of the Andals and Protector of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. As it is a matter of establishing authority, the general once again responds in a similar fashion giving all his titles and degrees and positions held.

(8)



Аз съм Денерис Таргарьен,
Първа с това име,
Родената в буря,
Неизгоримата,
Майка на драконите,
Халесии на великото тревно море,
Трошачката на окови,
Кралица на Андалите и
Закрилица на седемте кралства
на Вестерос!



Аз съм Венцислав Мутафчийски, Генерал-майор, Професор,
Доктор на медицинските науки, Началник на ВМА,
Магистър по мениджмънт на здравеопазването,
Президент на българския борд на
Балканския военномедицински комитет,
Президент на Балканския военномедицински комитет,
Президент на Българско научно дружество по военна медицина,
Член на управителния съвет на
Научното дружество по спешна медицина,
Заместник-председател на Българското хирургическо дружество и
Ръководител на Националния оперативен щаб
за борба с коронавируса в България.
Къде ве, малката!

Daenerys Targaryen, the First of Her Name,
Stormborn, The Unburnt, Mother of Dragons,
Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of
Chains, Queen of the Andals and Protector of
the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros

I am Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Major General,
Professor, Doctor of Medical Sciences,
Director at the Military Medical Academy,
Master of Health Management, President of
the Bulgarian Board of the Balkan Military
Medical Committee, President of the Balkan
Military Medical Committee, President of the
Bulgarian Military Medical Society, Member
of the Board of the Scientific Society of
Emergency Medicine, Deputy Chairperson of
the Bulgarian Surgical Society and Head of the
National Operational Headquarters for Fight
with the Coronavirus Pandemic in Bulgaria.
Off with the swagger, girlie!

Here, i.e. (8), when the Silver Queen gives the longer version of her achievements, the general looks unperturbed as well and fires back with all his other titles and achievements followed by “Off with the swagger, girlie!” The final words of the general feature another colloquial expression that was not used by Mutafchiyski and is not characteristic of his way of speaking. It is

imposed on him though, to show his supremacy and his dominant position. The image of the general used in this meme is the uncompromising one: there is no room for discussion, he has made his mind clear. Daenerys looks as if offended, outraged, and probably outplayed in her styling game as there is someone adorned with more titles than her.

These two memes would definitely appeal to all GOT fans as the authors have skillfully chosen to remix images that transmit the idea of a fight between egos and the struggle to impose one's authority. The battles of Daenerys are similar to the one led by the general against COVID-19 – full of difficult opponents and unexpected hurdles.

Perseverance and sticking to one's plan and strategy are the qualities necessary for a warrior to reach their goal. The latter is obvious in the next meme [9]. Mutafchiyski does not flinch from anything or anyone... not even from extraterrestrials coming to conquer the Earth. Even to them his response is in compliance with the regulations he has imposed. Thus, the aliens are placed under 14 days of quarantine and one can even see them looking out of a glazed balcony in a block of flats.

(9)



We have come to conquer the Earth.

14 days under quarantine!

The next meme (10) is a remix of the image of the American president who became notorious for the strange suggestions he gave to some of his followers, such as to drink / inject themselves with bleach or to get UV rays in order to protect themselves from the virus, among others. The meme, on the one hand, establishes Mutafchiyski's expertise as the US president is presented as asking for his opinion, while on the other, it shows how witty the Bulgarian general is and how stupid Trump appears to be.



General, is this the substance my people were supposed to drink?

TrUmP, the letters which take the even places in your name seem to be redundant!

(10)

In similar fashion to some of the previous memes, the encounter between the two never happened, so the exchange that followed was skillfully concocted by the author of the meme. The image of Trump is also remixed as can be deduced by the image of the bleach added in his hand and he naturally never asked such a question as the one added to his image. The meme is a humorous response to the actions of the American president in terms of prevention measures taken against the virus. Mutafchiyski never uttered the words attributed to him either, but his authority in the matter is evident.

There are a few memes in this section that are composed by using English in their verbal element, regardless of who the interlocutor is. The general is proficient in English and responds accordingly. The meme reviewed here, i.e. (11), differs from the rest due to the response provided. In this case the first image in the meme is a remix of the band Offspring and a verse from their song “Come out and play”. The image of Mutafchiyski is taken from one of his briefings but his response this time is actually the direct quotation of the opening verse of that particular song. The humor behind the use of the two lines is obvious: people do not want to stay at home and they just need someone to prompt them to go out to be ready to disobey the orders. That is why, true to the idea of social distance, the suggestion of the general is to keep people separated – a direct hit by the author of the meme.

(11)



Mutafchiyski and other Bulgarian officials involved in the fight against the pandemic

This last meme, i.e. [12], which was the only one in the corpus collected in the period March – May 2020 that depicted four main figures that were very prominent during the pandemic could be claimed as the ultimate remix and transmission of various codes. This is also the only meme in which there is a multitude of cultural codes introduced into the Bulgarian culture and in which there is no verbal exchange between the people involved. In this meme the general is numb and it is the other elements that speak instead.

As discussed elsewhere (See Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva), the mixture of cultural codes is quite magnificently conducted; the ease of processing is

low if one is to consider all the implications and intertextual links. The meme is amusing only at a surface level when considering the switch between the cast of *The Hobbit* and the Bulgarian figures in the fight against COVID-19.

(12)



Analyzed on a deeper level, the author has shown real ingenuity not only in the switch between “The Hobbit” and “The Covid,” which shifts the fictional reality into an actual situation, and the replacement of the original subtitle “The Battle of the Five Armies” with “The Battle for the Curve” to the same end, but also with the skillful allocation of roles to the real people in the Bulgarian fight against the virus. The main Bulgarian characters are four: Boyko Borisov – Bulgarian Prime Minister at the time, Prof. Ventsislav Mutafchiyski – head of the NCMS, Prof. Kantardzhiev – head of the national center for contagious and parasitic diseases, and Assoc. Prof. Angel Kunchev – Chief National Health Inspector. The Bulgarians involved in the fight against the virus take on the roles of Thorin Oakenshield, Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf and the Orc leader, respectively. One of the possible readings of this multifaceted meme is the fact that the people depicted will fight their cause with everything they have and would not hesitate to make the necessary sacrifices.

Conclusion

As seen above, while the main goal of memes is to make people smile or laugh, those on General Mutafchiyski also serve the function of establishing his authority and presenting him as a person of integrity and a man of his words, beliefs, professional expertise and policy.

The memes also present Ventsislav Mutafchiyski as the ultimate authority respected not only by Bulgarian members of society but by non-Bulgarian artists, political leaders, movie stars or characters, and even aliens. Practically everyone and everything is presented as subjected to the decisions and orders issued by him.

Furthermore, the memes on Ventsislav Mutafchiyski produced and disseminated during the first wave of the pandemic are skillfully created and very interesting to analyze. Despite the fact that structurally they follow a

similar pattern, i.e. opposing the image of the general to various representatives of Bulgarian or British / American culture and even fairytale characters and aliens, they feature interesting intertextual references based on the choices made by their authors.

The general analysis also comes to confirm the statement made by Wiggins that memes are units of cultural transfer laden with ideology as one can see the attitudes of the general public expressed in a creative way by meme posters / authors as well as the main policy followed in the period. The fact that one can assess the image as positively or negatively presented in the memes leads to the same conclusion.

Works Cited

- Aronson, Pamela, and Islam Jaffal. “Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens: Generational Humor, Identity, and Conflict during the Pandemic.” *Emerging Adulthood*. 10.2 (2021): 519–533. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968211058513>>
- Borenstein, Eliot. *Meanwhile, in Russia ...: Russian Internet Memes and Viral Video*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva, Desislava. “Multimodality in humour during a pandemic. The Covid: The Battle for the Curve.” *Media Linguistics. Language in the Coordinates of the Mass Media*. 8 (2021): 234-237.
- Cranston, Maurice. “ideology.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 27 Oct. 2020 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ideology-society>> Accessed 4 May 2022.
- Dawkins, Clinton Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Dynel, Marta. “Covid-19 Memes Going Viral: On the Multiple Multimodal Voices behind Face Masks.” *Discourse & Society*. 32. 2 (2020): 175–195. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520970385>>
- Eagleton, Terry. *Humour*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, New York: Longman, 1995.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
- Flaherty, Mihael G., and Cosima Rughiniș. “What Do Memes Tell Us about Self and Time during the Pandemic?” *Contexts What Do Memes Tell Us about Self and Time during the Pandemic Comments*. 13 Apr. 2021 <<https://contexts.org/articles/what-do-memes-tell-us-about-self-and-time-during-the-pandemic/>>
- Genova, Dafina. “Internet memeta i komunikatsiya onlayn. [Internet memes and communication online].” *Balgarski folklor*. 3 (2020): 295-314.

- Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.” *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Simon During. New York & London: Routledge, 1993. 90–103.
- Ilieva, Angelina. “The General, his fandom, and a participatory pandemic.” *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*. 82 (2021): 21-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2021.82.ilieva>.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez and Thomas Gora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Mavrodieva, Ivanka. “Intertekstualnost, khypertekstualnost i multimodalnost v mediite po temata COVID-19 [Intertextuality, hypertextuality and multimodality in the media on the topic COVID-19].” *Ezikov Svyat*. 18. 3 (2021): 8-22. <<https://doi.org/10.37708/ezs.swu.bg.v18i3.1>>
- Pauliks, Kevin: “Memes of the virus: social criticism of the corona pandemic on the internet.” *TelevIZion*. 33. E.S. (2020): 46–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13875>.
- Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.
- Todorova, Roumyana. *Insights in Text Linguistics. From Theory to Practice*. Shumen: Konstantin Preslavsky University Press, 2015.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. *Politics, Ideology, and Discourse*. Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2006.
- Wiggins, Bradley E. *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Wong, May Lai-Yin. *Multimodal Communication: A Social Semiotic Approach to Text and Image in Print and Digital Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.