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Research on the Cultural-Historical Phenomenology of Symbols and Signs in the Modern Information Space

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ABSTRACT

This article examines symbols and signs as phenomena of cultural and historical nature within the context of qualitative transformations in the modern information space. The relevance of addressing the topic is due to the fact that traditional sign-symbolic systems verbal, figurative, and ritual are moving into the digital environment and acquiring new functional properties without losing their historically accumulated cultural content. The aim of the work is to reveal the mechanisms of continuity and transformation of sign-symbolic forms as they transition from traditional cultural contexts into electronic communicative environments. The study employed comparative-historical, semiotic, and phenomenological methods, allowing for the consideration of the symbol simultaneously as a stable cultural unit and as an open, dynamically finalized structure. It is shown that digital symbols – emoji, interface pictograms, memes, and hashtags – function according to the same cultural and historical patterns as traditional symbols, revealing an accelerated dynamic of semantic shifts. The materials of the article can be used in university courses on culture semiotics, culturology, and medialinguistics.

Keywords: Symbol, sign, semiosphere, cultural and historical phenomenology, information space, digital communication, cultural code, semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The issue of symbols and signs has remained one of the central themes of humanitarian knowledge for over a century, yet its relevance is not only not diminishing but also acquiring a new resonance as the information environment mediated by digital technologies becomes the primary space for the existence of cultural meanings. If in classical semiotics, sign and symbol were primarily considered on the material of natural language, fine arts, myth, and ritual [9: 12], today the same categories require understanding in relation to a fundamentally new type of communicative environment – network, hypertext, and multimodal.

The concept of "cultural-historical phenomenology" combines two methodological principles. The first originates from the cultural-historical psychology of L. S. Vygotsky, according to which any sign act is simultaneously an act of individual consciousness and a product of historically established forms of cultural activity [4: 87]. The second principle is related to the phenomenological tradition, which interprets the symbol not as a ready-made, static object, but as a process of "giving" meaning to consciousness, unfolding in a specific historical and cultural situation. The combination of these approaches allows for the consideration of symbols and signs not as frozen units of cultural code, but as living, historically variable structures that preserve a recognizable semantic core.

The relevance of this study is determined by the fact that the digitalization of communication has significantly accelerated and complicated the processes of sign and symbol formation: alongside traditional forms (ornament, coat of arms, ritual gesture, religious emblem), fundamentally new sign practices – emoji, stickers, interface pictograms, memes, and hashtags – have emerged, which, despite their technogenic origin, reproduce sustainable cultural and historical mechanisms of symbolism. Studying this continuity appears to be important for both cultural theory and the practice of media education and language pedagogy.

The purpose of the article is to identify and describe the mechanisms through which the cultural-historical content of a symbol is preserved and transformed as it moves from a traditional cultural environment into a modern information space. To achieve the goal, the following tasks have been set: 1) to distinguish between the categories of "sign" and "symbol" in a cultural-historical perspective; 2) characterize the main types of sign-symbolic practices of the digital environment; 3) describe the patterns of semantic dynamics of the symbol under network communication conditions.

METHODS

The research material consists of theoretical sources on culture semiotics, culturology, and the philosophy of symbolic forms, as well as empirically observed units of modern digital communication – commonly used emojis, messenger sticker sets, stable internet memes, and graphic pictograms of user interfaces recorded in open sources and mass communication materials from 2015 to 2025.

Comparative-historical analysis served as the primary method, allowing for a comparison between the principles of functioning of traditional cultural symbols and the patterns of existence of digital signs. The semiotic method based on the distinction between iconic, index, and symbolic signs, proposed by C. S. Peirce [11: 45-52], was applied for the typologization of the analyzed material. The phenomenological method was used to describe the symbol as an act of meaningfulness, that is, not only as a stable structure but also as a lived cultural experience. Additionally, the structural-semantic analysis of individual sign units was applied according to the stratification model "cultural seme – cultural connotation – cultural concept – cultural background."

RESULTS

The proposed analysis is based on the distinction between sign and symbol, which dates back to the structural linguistics of F. de

Saussure, who defined sign as a two-sided essence that unites the signifier and the signified on the basis of conventional, arbitrary connection [12: 99-101]. A symbol, unlike an arbitrary sign, is characterized by a motivated connection between form and content and, which is especially significant for this study, by the multi-layeredness of cultural-historical layers of meaning. E. Cassirer defined symbolic form as universalium, through which spirit gives sensory material a stable spiritual form [6: 33]; A. F. Losev emphasized that a symbol is not a simple designation of a thing, but a generative model containing an infinite number of possible semantic developments in a condensed form [8: 68-70].

Applicable to the cultural-historical approach, the fundamental point is that a symbol is not created anew by each individual act of communication, but is inherited - assimilated by the subject during the process of inclusion in culture, which L. S. Vygotsky described as the process of "spinning" the sign into the inner plane of consciousness [4: 145]. In other words, a symbol is simultaneously a product of cultural history and a tool through which cultural history continues to reproduce itself in every new generation of speakers. Yu. M. Lotman enshrined this idea in the concept of the semiosphere – a holistic semiotic space of culture outside which an individual sign cannot be adequately understood and function [9: 250-252].

The transition of the main volume of cultural communication to the electronic network environment does not cancel the described patterns, but significantly intensifies their action. M. McLuhan noted as early as the mid-20th century that the change of a communicative carrier ("means") changes the structure of perception and organization of cultural experience on its own, regardless of the transmitted content [10: 9-11]. In the era of the information society, according to M. Castels' definition, network logic is becoming the dominant organizational form of culture as a whole, not just technology [7: 76]. The result is the accelerated formation of new sign-symbolic units – emojis, stickers, interface pictograms, memes, and hashtags.

The analysis shows that the listed units, despite their technogenic origin, function according to the same cultural and historical mechanisms as traditional symbols. Thus, the graphic

sign "heart," which originally emerged in medieval European iconography as a conventional depiction of an organ of love and compassion, preserves and continues to enhance its original cultural content in the digital environment, supplemented by new contextual meanings (gratitude, solidarity, irony), i.e., it undergoes the same stage dynamics of "cultural seme – cultural connotation – cultural concept" that describe the functioning of any traditional symbol. Similarly, an internet meme, possessing the formal characteristics of a short, vivid text, performs a classical symbolic function: it condenses a whole complex of cultural meanings into a single recognizable image, appealing to the historical and cultural background common to the communicants–that is, it performs the same function that W. Eco attributed to the cultural code as a system that ensures the possibility of understanding the message [14: 68].

A significant difference between digital sign-symbolic practices lies in the pace of their semantic dynamics. While a traditional symbol (ornament, rite, emblem) has been formed and modified over the lives of several generations, a digital sign is capable of acquiring, modifying, or losing significance within several months or even weeks, which is due to the high speed of feedback in network communication and the effect of viral spread. This does not abolish the cultural-historical nature of the sign, but significantly tightens the temporal scale of its existence, bringing digital symbolism closer to what J. Bodriyar called the accelerated reproduction of signs in the simulation system, when the sign increasingly refers not to an external reality, but to other signs within the same sign system [3: 19-22].

The functioning of a symbol in the information space is not limited to transmitting a fixed meaning – it also performs identification and consolidation functions, which R. Bart wrote about in relation to mythologized signs of mass culture, showing that the secondary sign system ("myth") is built on top of the primary denotative meaning and transfers a certain ideological and value load to it [1: 72-75]. Digital communities build their own symbolic repertoires – recognizable combinations of emojis, sustainable memes, and hashtags that mark belonging to a specific group – that perform a function similar to traditional

ethnic, confessional, or class emblems: they make an internal, shared value system visible to the outside and recognizable by "their own."

It is important that, at the same time, the multi-layered structure of the symbol described by B. A. Uspensky is preserved: the external, publicly accessible form of the sign (for example, a specific graphic emoji) coexists with the internal, culturally conditioned content, which is fully read only by the bearer of the corresponding cultural code [13: 21-24] From this, a practical conclusion arises that is significant for linguistic pedagogy: teaching the perception and correct use of modern sign-symbolic means should be built not as mastering an isolated set of conventional designations, but as introducing the learner into the cultural-historical context that generated the corresponding symbol, as it is this context that ensures adequate understanding and prevents the manipulative use of sign means, the danger of which S. G. Kara-Murza pointed out while analyzing the mechanisms of symbolic forms' influence on the mass consciousness [5: 151-154].

DISCUSSION

The conducted research allows for the conclusion that symbols and signs in the modern information space do not lose their cultural and historical nature, but only change their form and pace of existence. Digital sign practices – emojis, stickers, interface pictograms, memes, hashtags – reproduce the fundamental patterns of symbolism described in classical semiotics and cultural-historical psychology: the motivation of form by content, the multi-layeredness of meaning, heritability through the inclusion of the subject in culture, identification, and consolidation functions. The specificity of the digital environment lies, first and foremost, in the accelerated dynamics of semantic shifts and the increasing role of the sign as a reference to other signs, rather than only to an external reality.

The practical significance of the obtained results lies in the possibility of their application in developing university and school courses on culture semiotics, culturology, media literacy,

and language pedagogy, as understanding the cultural and historical underpinnings of modern sign practices contributes to the formation of a critical and, at the same time, culturally competent attitude toward the information space. The prospects for further research are linked to the comparative study of sign-symbolic practices in various linguocultures, particularly in Russian and Uzbek, which will allow for the identification of both universal and national-specific mechanisms of symbol functioning in the digital age.

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