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HOW INTERNET HUMOR IS CHANGING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Narzikulova Rayhona

Teacher of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract:

This thesis examines the influence of internet humor on the contemporary English language. The study analyses how memes, viral expressions, social media abbreviations and platform-specific genres reshape vocabulary, syntax, spelling and pragmatic norms. The results demonstrate that internet humor functions as a productive source of linguistic innovation and as a powerful agent of language change in the digital era.

Keywords: Internet humor, memes, English language, language change, digital communication, social media, neologisms, computer-mediated communication, sociolinguistics, viral expressions.

The English language has always been remarkably open to innovation, but the speed and scale of changes observed in the digital age are unprecedented. With more than five billion active internet users worldwide and the dominant role of English as the language of global online communication, the Web has become the largest laboratory of linguistic change in human history¹. A particularly powerful driver of this change is internet humor: memes, viral phrases, ironic captions, hashtags and platform-specific genres that spread across millions of users in a matter of hours.

¹Statista. (2024). Number of Internet Users Worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/>.



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The aim of this study is to examine how internet humor is reshaping the English language at the levels of vocabulary, grammar, orthography and pragmatics. The research is based on descriptive, sociolinguistic and corpus-oriented methods. The material includes English-language memes, TikTok captions, Twitter (X) posts, Reddit threads and YouTube comments collected between 2020 and 2025. The analysis identified several major directions in which internet humor influences English. The first is the rapid expansion of the lexicon. Memes generate neologisms that quickly enter mainstream usage. Words such as cringe, vibe, simp, sus, slay, mid, ratio and rizz originated in online humorous contexts and have now spread to spoken language and even to mainstream media. Some of these items have been included in major dictionaries: the Oxford English Dictionary added rizz as Word of the Year in 2023, while Merriam-Webster has incorporated dozens of internet-born terms in recent updates.

The second direction is the transformation of syntax and discourse patterns. Internet humor often relies on deliberately ungrammatical or fragmentary constructions that gain pragmatic value through repetition. The famous “I can has cheezburger” meme of the late 2000s normalized non-standard syntax for humorous effect. More recently, structures such as “the vibes are immaculate”, “this ain’t it, chief” or “tell me you’re X without telling me you’re X” have become productive templates used in everyday communication. These constructions challenge prescriptive grammar but are highly functional within their communities².

The third direction is the change of orthographic conventions. Humorous online writing actively uses lowercase letters as a sign of casual or ironic tone, intentional misspellings (teh, pwned, lmao), expressive lengthening (sooooo

²McCulloch G. Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language. — New York: Riverhead Books, 2019. — P. 142.



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good), keyboard symbols and emoji as punctuation. Capital letters, by contrast, are reserved for SHOUTING or ironic emphasis. These conventions are not random errors but conscious stylistic choices that signal group membership and communicative intent.

The fourth direction concerns pragmatic and stylistic shifts. Internet humor has accelerated the rise of irony as the default mode of online communication. Generation Z, in particular, often communicates through layered irony, where a statement may be sincere, ironic, post-ironic or meta-ironic, depending on context. The development of post-irony — the deliberate blurring of sincere and ironic intent — challenges traditional models of speech act theory and forces linguists to revise notions such as Grice's cooperative principle and the maxim of sincerity.

The fifth direction is the emergence of multimodal humor. Memes combine text, image, sound and video, creating a new semiotic environment in which linguistic units function alongside visual signs. The meaning of a meme is no longer carried by language alone but by the interaction between modes. This multimodality is gradually influencing offline communication as well: spoken English increasingly borrows references, intonational patterns and gestures from popular internet content.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, internet humor functions as a mechanism of identity construction. Different online communities (gamers, fandoms, professional groups, generational cohorts) develop their own humorous lexicons that serve as markers of belonging. The boundaries between standard and non-standard English become increasingly permeable, and new forms of linguistic prestige emerge based on creativity, virality and humor rather than on traditional notions of correctness.



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It is important to note that internet humor is not only a source of innovation but also a vehicle for the global spread of English. Non-native speakers learn many vocabulary items, syntactic patterns and pragmatic strategies through memes and viral content. For learners of English as a foreign language, including students at Uzbek institutions of higher education, internet humor represents both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, it requires extensive cultural and pragmatic knowledge; on the other hand, it provides authentic, engaging and constantly updated material for language acquisition.

In conclusion, internet humor is not a marginal phenomenon but one of the central forces reshaping contemporary English. It accelerates lexical innovation, challenges grammatical norms, transforms orthographic conventions, redefines pragmatic strategies and creates new multimodal genres. Future research should focus on the empirical measurement of these processes, on the comparison of language change rates between offline and online contexts, and on the development of pedagogical approaches that integrate internet humor into the foreign language classroom. Such integration would allow learners to engage with English not as a static system but as a living, rapidly evolving and globally shared resource.

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