INTERNET MEMES SEMIOTICS
IN ENGLISH POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Myroslava Zabotnova,
National Academy of the National Guard of Ukraine
3 Maidan Zakhysnykiv Ukrainy, Kharkiv, 61001
kachur_mira@ukr.net
ORCID iD 0000-0002-3166-1675

The article is devoted to semiotic specificity of the Internet memes in English political discourse. The aim of the work is to figure out the core semiotic peculiarities of the Internet memes in semiotic field. The article highlights the role of Internet memes in political discourse classifying them according to their textuality; thus, revealing the value of signs in memes' formation, and specifying types and peculiarities of signs in Internet memes in political discourse. The research unitizes the units based on the presidential election in the USA 2020. The intention of memes' creation depends on the verbalization circumstances — in 2020 this factor is determined by the pandemic. So, this selection of Internet memes targets at politicians' abilities and disabilities to override the chaos.

Key words: *semiotics, sign, political discourse, political meme, presidential election, context.*

Заботнова М. В.

Семіотика мемів в англомовному політичному дискурсі

Стаття присвячена семіотичним особливостям інтернет-мемів в англомовному політичному дискурсі. Метою дослідження є визначення ключових семіотичних аспектів англомовних мемів зазначеної тематичної групи. Для досягнення мети було запропоновано класифікацію інтернет-мемів, беручи за основу рівень їх контекстуальності, висвітлено способи імплементації інтернет-мемів у політичному дискурсі, визначено роль семіотики у формуванні англомовних мемів. Матеріалом для роботи слугували інтернет-меми, присвячені президентським виборам у Сполучених Штатах Америки у 2020 році.

Ключові слова: *семіотика, знак, політичний дискурс, політичні меми, президентські вибори, контекст.*

Introduction

Internet memes occupy a vital position in the modern world of human interaction, and political discourse is not an exception. English news agencies which are represented in social networks appeal to political information through memes, thus the range of the Internet users involved in their sharing is wider. Mostly, Internet memes are used to verbalize the process of interaction and to make it viral.

The first meme connected with politics appeared in 2000 during the presidential debate when the 43[d] President of the United States of America mispronounced the word "Internet" turning it into "Internets" (*Picture 1*), George W. Bush repeated his mistake four years later during the debate with John Kerry [10]. This situation caused the precedent of humorous memes connected with politicians, and such memes were the first, but far not the last. Although the structure of a meme consists of five components: the image (photo, drawing, etc.), inscription, video-fragment, and moving as well as stable elements. Memes may have any combination

or all five components at a time, more often it is possible to see memes presented as a combination of picture and inscription.
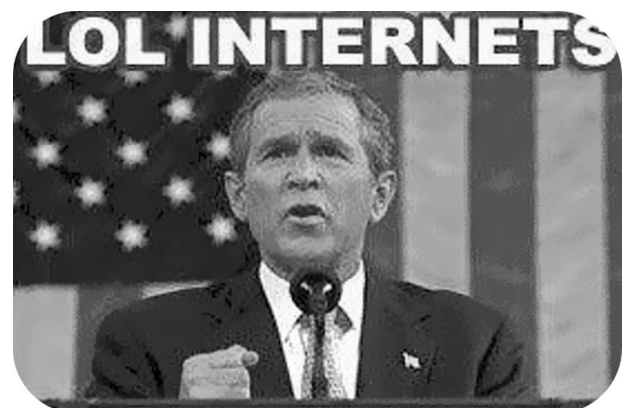
Picture 1. "Internets" [12]

Numerous researchers work with Internet memes: Dawkins R. [8] was the first to define memes as an independent unit, Davison P. [7] focused

on memes' visual effects, and Kulkarni A. [11] analyzed different peculiarities of political memes. Research of semiotic peculiarities of English Internet memes in political discourse requires an exhaustive selection of items that became core means of political news presentation and need interpretation of memes' signs for correct understanding.

The work aims at figuring out the core semiotic peculiarities of Internet memes in English political discourse. With the help of content analysis of the selected memes we define their types, explore the core signs and their textual specificity for English political memes of the 2020 American election campaign.

Our selection is based on official Internet sites and Instagram pages of news agencies such as BBC News, CNN, MSNBC, NBC News, The Times, and Washington Post. All memes correlate with the presidential election in the United States of America 2020 between the 45th President of the United States of America Donald Trump and the 46th President of the United States of America Joe Biden.

Theoretical background

Semiotics was defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, as the study of "the life of signs within society" [16] which leads contemporary researchers to discourse, as it comprises different types of signs, expressed both by linguistic and non-linguistic means. Internet memes can entertain, inspire, and inform at the same time.

Cambridge Dictionary proposes to define memes as "an idea, image, video, etc. that is spread very quickly on the internet" [4]. The concept "meme" was firstly coined in 1976 by British Dr. R. Dawkins, who compared memes with genes that can replicate "as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" [8, p. 192]. Bradly E. Wiggins compared memes with artifacts which are a part of digital culture [23, p. 6]. In 2012, Shifman L. proposed to define memes as "units of popular culture, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" [17, p. 367]. P. Davison pointed out that an Internet meme is "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" [7, p. 122]. The scholar highlights three possible aspects of memes realization, such as manifestation (meme's observable and external phenomena), behavior (action presented in the meme), and ideal (the concept or idea reflected by the meme).

Besides, L. Shifman determined three dimensions that can be distinguished from the Internet memes being cultural items — content, form, and stance. Content is reflected by both the ideas and ideologies presented in the text of the meme, form is reflected with the physical form of the meme's message, and stance is presented by definite information conveyed by the meme [17, p. 367]. "A meme can have a rational or an emotional focus, which is why the notion of emotionality versus rationality was considered as an important dimension predicting meme virality" [9, p. 4]. Moreover, in the same work, E. M. Gonzales describes the research of likelihood based on the quantitative analysis of political memes. At the same time, he proposes to divide humorous memes based on the linguistic memes of their implementation: derision, irony, and parody [9, p. 11–12]. Memes became an integral part of information presentation by news agencies throughout the Internet. They ease the process of communication being accepted and used by a huge number of users, moreover, they may attract more attention to political parties and their campaigns.

In political discourse, it is possible to figure out the following genres: government deliberations, parliamentary debates, party programs, and speeches by politicians [19, p. 212]. In "Political Discourse and Ideology", the Dutch scholar Teun van Dijk pointed out that not every piece of politicians' interaction can be covered with the term political discourse, thus "informal conversation of a politician with her friends does not count as a political discourse: the discourse must be produced by the speaker in her/his professional role of a politician and an institutional setting. In a more action-oriented way, we may also say that discourse is political when it accomplishes a political act in a political institution, such as governing, legislation, electoral campaigning, and so on" [19, p. 212]. In our work, we consider that political Internet memes represent situations that involve all political spheres starting from news articles on social networks and up to political speeches, debates, and campaigns.

It is essential, that all the memes are produced not by the politicians themselves, but by the Internet users, IT managers of political campaigns as well as by the news agencies which inform the audience about the political issues.

Political Internet memes realize a wide range of politics-related components. A. Kulkarni in her work "Internet Memes and Political Discourse" [11, p. 14] mentions such memes' generators as paid bloggers, microbloggers, and commenters who can be hired to process the political Internet memes formation.

We divide Internet memes into two major types: textual and non-textual. Textual Internet memes are those which have printed or written phrases as well as word-combination of different length and information capacity; non-textual are the memes that consist of pictures or photos without any printed or written phrase or word-combination. Each of these groups can be divided into the following subgroups:
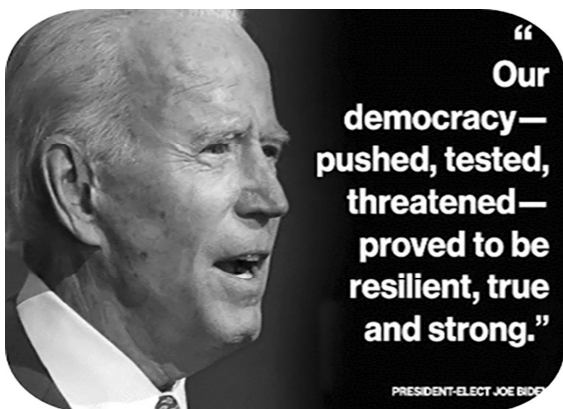
1) *textual:*

— *original Internet memes* (*Picture 2*) consist of an unmanipulated photo and a short verbal message. They have a written or printed passage, which was in the original image, not added by meme's generator. In the given example, these printed passages are "Biden" and "Harris" which have not been purposefully manipulated.

Picture 2. Original Internet meme [3]

— *symbiotic Internet memes* (*Picture 3*) are the Internet memes that combine the photo with inserted text, incorporated passage, or word-combination. In most cases, such passage is a quote from the politician's speech or a big informative article presented in the magazine or newspaper;


Picture 3. Symbolic Internet meme [5]

— *integral Internet memes* (*Picture 4*) consist of man-made drawing which has contextually creolized text; integral memes look like cartoon or comics due to the similarity in their form and way of implementation;
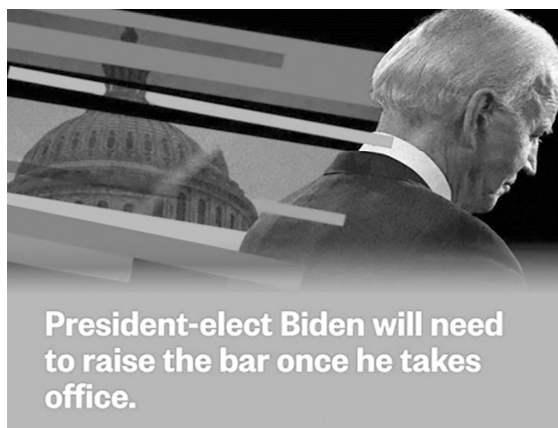
— *fused Internet memes* (*Picture 5*) consist of the combination of two or more pictures, photos, and images with a text. Mostly, they are represented by a politician's photo, and visual effects which help to add emotional marking to the meme, and short written or printed passage which highlights the main purpose of political meme;

— *phrasal Internet memes* (*Picture 6*) consist of the text only. They are represented with the help of abstracts from a politician's speeches as well as from political informative articles from magazines or newspapers; nevertheless, such political Internet memes can be compared to quotes due to their similarity in presentation. The monochromatic background of such memes goes without any picture, photo, or visual effect;
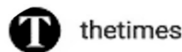
Picture 4. Integral Internet meme [20]

Picture 5. Fused Internet meme [14]

Picture 6. Phrasal Internet meme [22]

2) *non-textual:*

— *original Internet memes* (*Picture 7*) consist of unmanipulated photos only. Mostly, those are the pictures that become memes due to their frequent appearance in social networks;

Picture 7. Origanal Internet meme [15]

— *fused Internet memes* (*Picture 8*) consist of the combination of two or more original pictures. They are bright and serve to demonstrate all the important issues in one unit, which is achieved with the help of numerous visual effects, pictures, and photos mixed in different ways;

Picture 8. Fused Internet meme [14]

— *pictorial Internet memes* (*Picture 9*) consist of man-made graphical images or manipulated pictures. Such memes are implemented as a drawing or sketch that may have much in common with comics.

Picture 9. Pictorial Internet meme [6]

Methods

To determine the role of memes in political discourse we used *critical discourse analysis*. Critical Discourse Analysis discusses the form as well as the content of the means of communication, in this piece of research political Internet memes and the social practices that form them [13, p. 2362]. Thus, it is essential to figure out intentional lexical and pragmatical aspects of memes. The work proposes *content-analysis* and *semiotic analysis* to figure out the main semiotic features of the English Internet memes in political discourse. In some cases, a system of semiotic signs provides overt evidence on crucial aspects of the logical form of sentences, ones that are only inferred indirectly in spoken language.

Meme on the *Picture 10* was posted on the 29th of November 2020 and was devoted to the lockdown in the UK that could become the end of the British pubs and restaurants. Due to the Urban Dictionary, the saying *Bring out your dead* is "an exclamation used during the time of the Black Plague in order to let people know that the cart for dead bodies was passing by. Anyone who had a friend or housemate that had recently died of the plague would literally "bring out their dead" and throw the person on top of the pile" [21]. Thus, the main signs of the meme are the cart, design, and quote. The quote intends to compare the seriousness of the results of two major pandemics — the Black Plague and Covid-19.

Picture 10. Bring out Your Dead [20]

Moreover, to systematize the received results we use *quantitative analysis*. To identify semiotic peculiarities of the Internet memes in political discourse and figure out their most frequently used types; 366 memes were under study, dated between the 17th of November up to the 23rd of January 2021.

Out of all 366 items, BBC News is represented by 37 political memes, CNN — by 70 political memes, MSNBC — by 41 political memes, NBC News — by 40 political memes, The Times — by 34 political memes, and Washington Post — by 144 political memes. The table below shows the correlation between their source and type quantity in each media.

		BBC News	CNN	MSNBC	NBC	The Times	Washington Post	Total number
Textual	Original	6	0	0	2	0	0	8
	Symbiotic	21	49	10	12	0	13	105
	Integral	0	1	1	2	23	2	29
	Fused	8	10	10	6	0	17	51
	Phrasal	2	7	12	6	0	112	139
Non-textual	Original	0	3	3	9	0	0	15
	Fused	0	0	5	2	8	0	15
	Pictorial	0	0	0	1	3	0	4
Total number		37	70	41	40	34	144	366

Figure 1. Frequency of memes usage based on their types

As we can see, *Figure 1* shows that NBC Newsagency is the only media source that uses all types of political Internet memes, while The Times uses the least quantity of memes types — only 3 (one textual integral, and two non-textual). Washington Post and BBS News use only textual memes. At the same time, Washington Post prefers phrasal Internet memes, they are the most frequent (112 times). CNN and MSNBC mostly post, textual memes, but can use non-textual original ones.

Among all the selected media resources, Washington Post verbalizes their political news using the Internet memes (144) more frequently. The second place is occupied by CNN (70 memes) and their quantity is twice lower than Washington Post's within the same period. The third place is shared by NBC and MSNBC having an almost identical number of memes (40 and 41). And, finally, fourth place is occupied by BBC News and The Times with 37 and 34 memes. Comparing Washington Post (144) and The Times (34) it is noticed that within analyzed 66 days Washington Post uses political memes at least two times per day while The Times uses one meme per two or three days.

Results and discussions

The application of our methodology allows us to reveal certain phenomena in memes' semiotics and to interpret different signs in our material. The research follows the proposed classification and shows the connection between political Internet memes and semiotic peculiarities which they may have, implied or inferred.

If we start with original textual memes, we need to consider two contrasting political memes from *Picture 11* and see how the application of different signs and verbal means fulfill the intentions and lead to similar interpretations.

Original Internet memes. Both pictures have the same signs: mood, design, pandemic, and passage. Representing different situations posted memes share the same mood. *Picture 11A* shows a cap with a saying: "Make America Normal Again" that correlates with Trump's electoral campaign "Make America Great Again". Mask on this Internet meme appeals to the pandemic of 2020 — Covid-19. The saying on the mask "God Bless" has religious context and the desire for national prosperity. The core aspect of *Picture 11B* is the saying: "Black Voters Matter"

Picture 11A. Original lexical meme [3]

Picture 11B. Original lexical meme [3]

paraphrases the slogan "Black Lives Matter" — it demonstrates the situation with George Floyd and protests which happen worldwide.

Symbiotic Internet memes, mostly, have common signs due to the peculiarities of their formation.

Picture 12A demonstrates the verbalization of political gender equality. Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is the first dark-skinned, Asian-American woman who occupies such a high position in politics. White-and-black colors support the contrast and highlight the connection between the idea and the speaker. The flag of the United States of America demonstrates national values and national rights, especially taking into consideration that the new US political faces, involved in the world of politics by the 46th President of the United States of America, for the first time in history present the biggest diversity of gender, race, nationality, etc.

Picture 12B, with the 44th President of the United States of America Barack Obama, the 1st dark skin President of the country, is also a symbiotic textual meme, representing the same idea through reverse means, yet the same signs: color, design, quote. The racial inference is still interpreted through these means, even if the idea in the quote is lexically unrelated to human rights. Both pictures present smiling postures which help to attract attention to the positive lexical quotes which follow the presented political Internet meme.

Picture 12A. Symbiotic lexical meme [5]
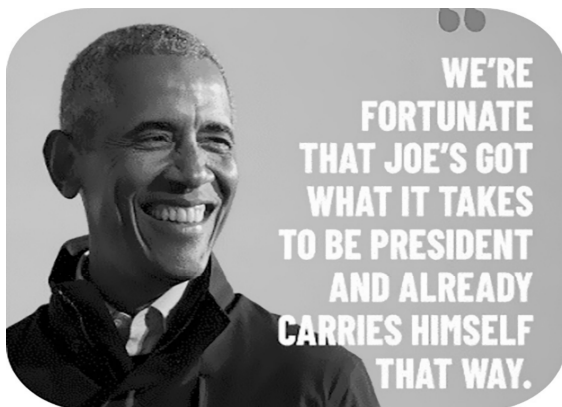
Picture 12B. Symbiotic lexical meme [5]

Integral textual political memes can also be contrasted in their sign and text contexts.

Presidential election 2020. Key signs of the memes are design, mood, and passage. *Picture 13A* depicts the Office in the White House and the 45th President of the United States of America. The quantity of lockers on the door shows the absence of desire to leave the position, the saw named "Biden" depicts Trump's successor. *Picture 13B* demonstrates the heads of the government of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping who celebrate the conflict in the US politics that provokes the waves of strikes all over the country that is illustrated with the headline of the newspaper "America Divided".

*Picture 13A*. Integral lexical meme [20]

Picture 13B. Integral lexical meme [20]

Fused Internet memes can have similarities in design that are determined by key elements of their implementation.

Fused Internet memes show us two politicians with blue background that is the color of the Democratic Party which they represent. This group of memes has common signs: color and design. Presentation of information varies; thus, the sign of the passage of *Picture 14B* is a quote. Moreover, *Picture 14B* has
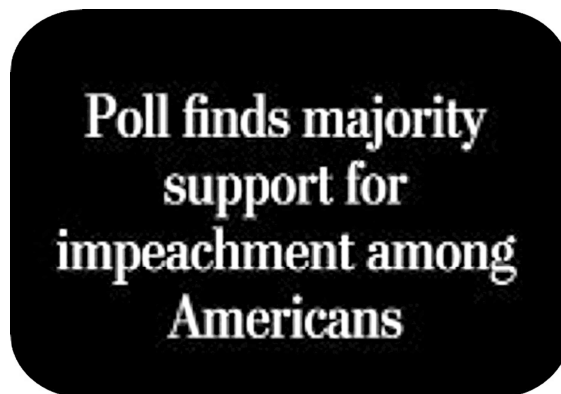
a visual effect that is similar to falling leaves and can be interpreted as "the wind of changes". While picture 14A depicts stars in the background that may symbolize the flag of America. Both pictures include printed passages — on *Picture 14A* there are keywords while *Picture 14B* has a quote from the presented politician's speech.
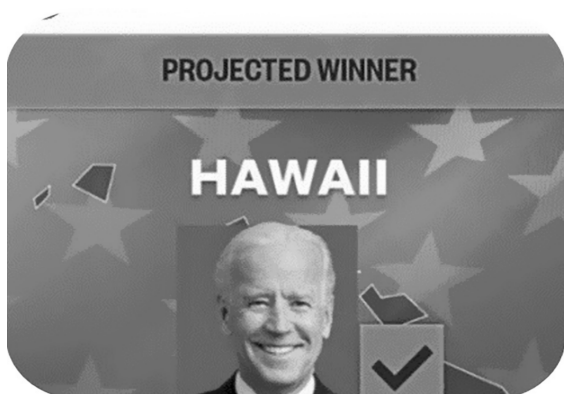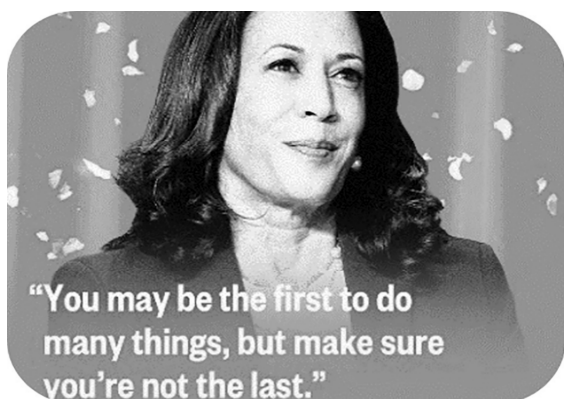

Picture 14A. Fused Internet meme [14]

Picture 14B. Fused Internet meme [14]

Phrasal Internet memes are almost identical in structure and design, possible differences are the color of letters, background, and fonts.

Phrasal Internet memes are the least informative from the side of semiotics due to the small number of signs to be interpreted. Thus, the signs of both presented memes are colors and design, the *Picture 15B* has one more sign — quote. The proposed units (*Pictures 15A* and *15B*) have the unity of white-and-black that is a neutral and widely spread combination of colors to present short abstracts from the political speeches or the articles. *Picture 15A* demonstrates a short statement with core information concerning the current situation whose main intention is to inform the audience, while *Picture 15B* provides the abstract from the speech of Representative Liz Cheney.

Textual Internet memes have a broad variety of verbalization using numerous semiotic signs such as mood, design, pandemic, passage, and color. The most widespread textual memes are phrasal due to their huge quantity being posted by Washington

Post. Symbiotic textual memes (105) occupy the second place while fused as well as integral Internet memes did not reach half of the symbiotic units (51 and 29). The least spread are original textual memes — only 8 units, where 6 of them were posted by the Times.

The first type of non-textual Internet memes is **original without lexical context**.

Picture 15A. Phrasal Internet meme [21]

Picture 15B. Phrasal Internet meme [21]

They are presented with photos that become memes only because of being involved in the process of Internet appearance to highlight political news. Both pictures represent the same idea, furthermore, they share the same signs: speech, relationship, and election. *Picture 16A,* as well, has signs of the pandemic. It promotes the will to follow the worldwide requirements because the future first lady Jill Biden wears medical gloves as well as a mask to protect herself and the surrounding from coronavirus and, at the same time, to show solidarity with the nation in such a tough time. Proposed pictures of this group demonstrate the personalized relations between the candidates and their wives; the distance between the couples — on the *Picture 16A* it is shorter than on *Picture 16B* that is the bright demonstration of intimacy as well as the appeal to the warmth that may influence the future political situation due to the harmony in personal life.

Fused without textual components are always manipulated pictures and the range of their signs is wide and diverse.
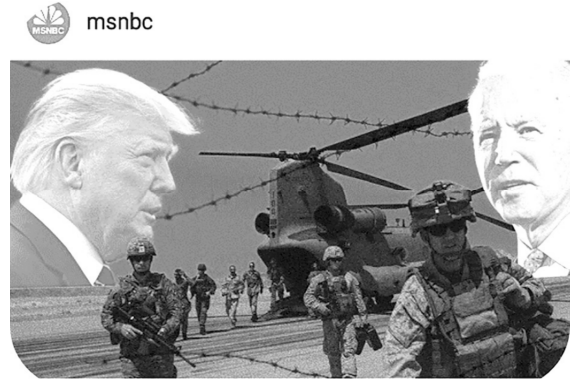
Picture 16A. Original Internet meme [14]

Picture 16B. Original Internet meme [14]

Picture 17A. Fused Internet meme [15]

Picture 17B. Fused Internet meme [15]

Picture 18A. Pictorial Internet meme [6]

Picture 18B. Pictorial Internet meme [6]

The inherent signs of both memes are design and mood, the mood itself varies in the presented memes — *Picture 17A* represents the mood of the pandemic, and *Picture 17B* verbalizes the mood of war. Both pictures present candidates for the Presidential tenure — 45th President of the nited States of America Donald Trump and the 46th President of the United States of America Joe Biden. While *Picture 17A* stresses the international pandemic of coronavirus and the negative role of political disputes which do not help to solve the problem, *Picture 17B* stresses the war not just between the politicians, but also between the countries that include Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, etc.

Pictorial Internet memes do not have any textual support.

These memes have identical signs: design, colors, pandemic, and freedom. Both presented units have correlations with the Statue of Liberty and the 45th President of the United States of America Donald Trump. These Internet memes appeal to violation of rights especially those connected with human rights and freedoms by the head of the government because the Statue of Liberty being a present by France to determine friendship between the countries gained another meaning — Independence of the country as well as the abolition of slavery. What is more, *Picture 18B* demonstrates

the negative development of the situation connected with the pandemic that is verbalized with the help of medical mask; due to the World Health Organization, the United States of America occupies the first place due to the high quantity of cases (on the 10th of February 2021 this number is 28, 825, 174 cases).

Throughout the wide range of signs verbalized in the proposed memes the most frequent are design (7), color (4), pandemic (4), quote (3), and mood (3). All the signs reflect the reality of nowadays surrounding both political and social. Signs such as design and quotes are more frequently used in textual Internet memes while the mood is common in non-textual ones. Color and pandemic are met in both types — textual and non-textual. *Figure 2* demonstrates the quantity of the Internet memes' usage by their type. That is required to realize the frequency of semiotic signs verbalization which are represented through political Internet memes.
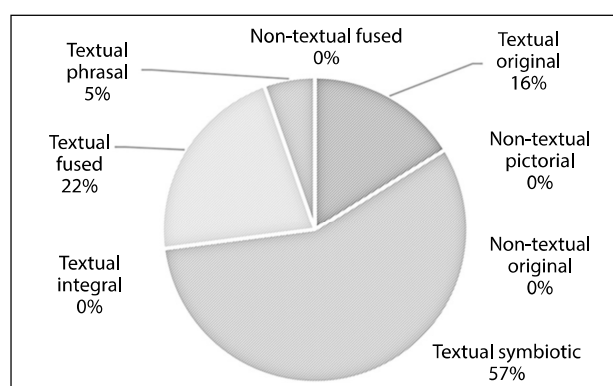

Figure 2. Percentage of political Internet memes

Figure 2 shows that phrasal Internet memes are the most frequently used, which happens due to the high quantity of such units shared by the analyzed Washington Post. The second place is occupied by the symbiotic political memes. The gap between these two groups and the others is huge:
— textual symbiotic — 57%;
— textual fused — 22%;
— textual original — 16%;
— textual phrasal — 5%.

Non-textual Internet memes approached 0% due to the low frequency of their usage (only 34 units from 366).

Conclusions

So, semiotic peculiarities of political Internet memes have a great impact on the understandability formation. Political Internet memes which are implemented throughout news agencies presented in Instagram (BBC News, CNN, MSNBC, NBC News, The Times, and Washington Post) have a wide range of semiotic features among which it is possible to enlist: appeal to the national priority, appeal to the pandemic situation concerning Covid-19, expression of individuality, presentation of values, etc. Having distinguished eight types of political Internet memes, it was figured out that the most used units are textual memes, namely textual symbiotic, fused, original, and phrasal. Non-textual are not so widespread, thus it is essential to define their role in political memes' formation with this reason there is a need to carry out an experiment which will help to distinguish the pointed-out issue.

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