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SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN INTERNET HUMOR RELATED TO COVID-19

Розглянуто особливості італійського вербального Інтернет-гумору за тематикою COVID-19 (період січень–червень 2020) у соціолінгвістичному контексті. Охарактеризовано різні типи жартів на означену тематику. Виділено та проаналізовано засоби творення комічного ефекту, лінгвістичний та референційний гумор – каламбури, алюзії, самоіронічний гумор, тощо. Досліджено специфіку італійських жартів, їхній зв'язок із внутрішніми подіями та процесами в італійському суспільстві.

Ключові слова: гумор, COVID-19, вербальний гумор, лінгвістичний гумор, референційний гумор, жарт, гра слів, алюзія.

Introduction. Formulation of the research problem and its significance. Language has always been the main resource to react to all processes in society. Jokes have been used as a powerful influential tool for a long time in human history. Jokes appear as the reaction, externalization of human thoughts, and conceptualization. They are also a way to deal with pressure and form bonds of common experience.

Although humor appears in all cultures and societies, it is not uniform. It is more obviously embedded in sociocultural context than most other communication. Our research gives us important data on psychology, sociology, culturology, and anthropology of a determined society. It offers an opportunity to understand the semantic phenomena and the cognitive processes involved in producing jokes. That is why the topic of this article is acute and relevant to the main trends in modern linguistics.

The **COVID-19 pandemic in Italy** is part of the pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus was first confirmed to have spread to Italy on 31 January 2020, when two Chinese tourists in Rome tested positive for the virus. By the beginning of March, the virus had spread to all regions of Italy. On 31 January, the Italian government suspended all flights to and from China and declared a state of emergency. On 16 May, the government announced a plan for the easing of restrictions, and on 3 June, free movement within the whole national territory was restored, *de facto* ending the lockdown (the first wave) (“Cose che noi umani”). Therefore, we can mark the timeframe of the first wave of COVID-19 in Italy as of February 2020 – June 2020, and this is the period that our article deals with.

The goal and specific tasks of the article. The goal of this article is to analyze the Italian humor on the first wave of COVID-19 (February 2020 – June 2020). In particular, to see how the jokes reflect all phases of the pandemic, and how the humor reflects the attitude of Italians to all processes in society in this period. Also, we analyze the types of jokes used and how the comedic effect is created.

As sources, we used the Internet humor communities *Commenti Memorabili* and <https://www.facciabuco.com/>. The wide range of humorous texts on coronavirus available online (cartoons, jokes, clips, witty postcards, parodies, etc.) makes it necessary to narrow the field of research. This article focuses on verbal jokes and partly verbal-visual jokes (memes).

Analysis of the research into the problem. Defining humor is a difficult task. Scholars have agreed that humor is a feature of human beings that has always been present in communication (Dynell 2008).

Philosophies of humor date back at least to antiquity and continued in the Open Era (from Plato, Aristotle to Emmanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud), but the linguistic study of humor has developed relatively recently. It has been formalized into a semantic theory. The largest strides in this direction were made by Raskin in his famous book *Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH)* (1985). This work is one of the most complete linguistic theories of humor developed with the goal of presenting the necessary and sufficient conditions, in purely semantic terms, for a text to be funny. Another important research of the linguistic theory of humor is the general theory of verbal humor (GTVH) proposed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo in the article “Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model” (Raskin 1985).

For the purposes of this paper, we consider it appropriate to analyze the humor in terms of categorization, before dealing with the topic assigned in our study. It is necessary to make the following distinctions: Shade divided humor by sources in figural humor, visual humor, auditory humor, and verbal humor (Shade 1996: 2). The division is relative because many of the jokes can involve different types (complex jokes). We focus our research on verbal humor, in some cases with visual components. Verbal humor is understood as being produced by means of language or text (Raskin 1985).

Also, we share the division by Graham Ritchie and Attardo of the linguistic jokes in 2 categories – linguistic jokes and propositional jokes (Graham Ritchie), or verbal jokes and referential jokes (Attardo 1991). In referential jokes, the comedic effect is created due to the associations with some processes in society. In linguistic jokes, the comedic effects are produced by the lexical form. They are also called language-dependent jokes or language-based jokes.

There has not been too much linguistic research on Italian COVID humor, as it is a recent phenomenon. Daniela Pietrini made an analysis of the memes related to COVID-19, as a part of the project “*Parole nel turbine vasto*” (Pietrini 2020). The author divided Italian COVID memes according to the topics – on memes of ordinary everyday life (in quarantine), pajama memes, memes about Giuseppe Conte, and text-visual quotations. The division is conventional and includes the most prevalent COVID memes.

Statement regarding the basic material of the research and justification of the results. The majority of Italian jokes on COVID-19 are referential; linguistic, the most popular group being puns. A pun is a play on words that produces a humorous effect by using a word that suggests two or more meanings, or by exploiting similar sounding words that have different meanings.

The most popular Italian Coronavirus pun was based on the usage of the ambiguity of the word “Corona”. For example, price tags in a wine shop “Corona senza virus” on the eponymous brand of beer.

The popular pun character during the pandemic became Fabrizio Corona, an Italian television and media personality and former paparazzo.

The meme in picture 1 uses all the polysemy of the word “Corona”: 1) Surname of the Italian celebrity, 2) headdress, which is a symbol of monarchical power, 3) brand of beer, 4) coronavirus.



Picture 1. Corona polysemy pun

Other jokes with Fabrizio Corona: “Quando tutti in TV parlano di corona e di carcerati, ma in nessun dei due casi c’entri tu.” “E poi dite che non ce l’hanno con me. Pure a un virus hanno dato il nome mio!”; “L’avevo detto che ve l’avrei fatta pagare cara!!”. This example represents a complex joke, as it includes a pun and referential allusion to the famous personality.

Another example of pun - the company “Mulino bianco” of Barilla has cookies “Abbracci” and “Saluti”. In one of the puns “Abbracci” were crossed out with caption “La mia colazione è differente, mangio i biscotti che rispettano le distanze di sicurezza”. Humorous effects created by the pun depend upon the ambiguities of the word “Abbracci” 1) hugs 2) brand of cookies.

The referential humor includes ironic, sarcastic, and self-denigrating humor, allusions, anecdotes, etc. It references a person, place, thing, or event.

Giuseppe Conte, who served as Prime Minister of Italy from June 2018 until February 2021, became a very popular subject of jokes related COVID-19. Conte's "meme popularity" increases exponentially starting from March 9, 2020, the date of the press conference in which the premier explains the new measures planned for the containment and contrast of the coronavirus (Pierini 2020). Internet users find irony in the entry into force of ever new and increasingly restrictive measures, but also in the recurring issuance of new decrees, and the continuous changes to the forms for self-certification. These jokes are made as absurd statements attributed to the Prime Minister: *farete sesso a giorni alterni / gli uomini il martedì, le donne il venerdì; ho riaperto le cartolerie / così comprate i pennarelli e la prossima autocertificazione me la fate colorata!!!*. Many of the attributed statements begin with "uscirà solo chi...": *uscirà solo chi / ha trovato la scritta hai vinto nel Kinder Bueno; uscirà solo chi / grida "Inter merda"; uscirà solo chi / ha capito cosa ho detto*.

Chuck Norris is always a popular model for jokes with reference to his invulnerability: *Le lacrime di Chuck Norris possano eliminare il Covid. Peccato che Chuck Norris non pianga mai. "Chuck Norris è stato esposto a coronavirus. Ora il coronavirus dovrà stare 14 giorni in quarantena."* "Chuck Norris ha il coronavirus. Ora il coronavirus dovrà stare 14 giorni in quarantena.

One of the examples of referential jokes is the following, that represents the year 2020 as a TV show and every phase as an episode. The comedic effect is created here evoking associations with events in real life. In parentheses, we indicated what events they are related to.

Ep. 1. Dov'è Bugo? (an allusion to the situation in Festival di Sanremo when the singer Bugo was leaving the stage mid-performance because his colleague Morgan changed the lyrics of their song to diss him).

Ep. 2. "Etcui" (the beginning of COVID, first cases).

Ep. 3. La conferenza stampa (period of March 2020 when Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had conferences every day – 8 March 2020, Conte expanded the quarantine to all of Lombardy and 14 other northern provinces, and on the following day to all of Italy, placing more than 60 million people in quarantine. On 11 March 2020, Conte prohibited nearly all commercial activity except for supermarkets and pharmacies, etc. Also, it was a period of active press conferences by the mayors of cities).

Ep. 4. Il lockdown.

Ep. 5. "L'assalto ai supermercati".

Ep. 6. "Ce la faremo" (period of optimistic slogan (*Ce la faremo! Andrà tutto bene!*) flags on balconies).

Ep. 7. Caccia al runner (the period when it was forbidden to go out, and the mayors of cities drove residents home – usually those who went for a run).

Ep. 8. Il mistero del lievito (April 2020 when the yeast disappeared in the stores because it became popular to bake bread).

Ep. 9. Pane pizza e balconi (period of songs on balconies to raise the spirit, and homemade dishes).

Ep. 10. Microsoft Teams (distanced working).

Ep. 11. Nomi e cognomi (autocertification documents to be able to go out during quarantine).

Ep. 12. Il sito dell'INPS (INST – L'Istituto nazionale della previdenza sociale – is the main entity of the Italian public retirement system. All waged laborers and most of the self-employed, without a proper autonomous social security fund, must be subscribed to INPS. The period when INPS began paying social security benefits according to art. 38 of the Italian Constitution and the special laws about mandatory social insurances.).

Ep. 13. Resta a casa ancora un po' (the prolongations of quarantine measures but with optimistic prognosis).

Ep. 14. "I lanciafiamme" (Allusion to the famous quote by the mayor of the Campania region, that became viral – "I get news that someone wants to prepare a graduation party, we will send the carabinieri... but we will send them with flamethrowers..." (Mi arrivano notizie che qualcuno vuole preparare la festa di laurea, mandiamo i carabinieri... ma li mandiamo con lanciafiamme.) As a consequence, some of the graduates in Campania wore bombonieres with flamethrowers with De Luca's face).

Ep. 15. I congiunti (Visits to "congiunti" (kin, relatives) was one of the most substantial concessions included in the new self-certification model in May. But it provoked questions by the Italians: who can be included in "congiunti"? So the premier Conte needed to clarify the term (see also picture 2).

Ep. 16. Vado a trovare mia cugina, agente (pretended visits to relatives after the permission described above).



Picture 2. «Congiunti» and Conte

Self-denigrating humor has a kind of therapeutic psychological effect when a person deals with difficult situations. The comedic effect is created by bringing the situation to the point of absurdity. For example, the comments to the news that Italy occupied third place in the world by the number of contagious – "Si punta al secondo",

“FORZA AZZURRI”, “Cina: salutate la capolistaaaa”, or jokes about the duration of the pandemic and education in this period “Mi ricordo avevo 10 anni durante il COVID ora ne ho 18 e faccio la terza media. Meno male che è finito, ne siamo usciti più migliori assai.”

Ironical writings in bars: “Divieto assoluto di amuchina e mascherine qui si muore da eroi con il boccale di birra in mano”; “Per entrare senza mascherina dobbiamo misurarvi la temperatura. Abbiamo solo termometri rettali. Voltatevi e tornate a prendere la mascherina oppure voltatevi e basta...”.

Jokes about 2020 as a year of lost opportunities: “Io mi rifiuto di aggiungere questo anno alla mia età! Non lo sto usando!”.

Self-denigrating humor as a reaction to the restrictions (Social distancing): *In discoteca si potrà ballare ma a due metri di distanza. è già qualcosa, visto che prima le fighe mi stavano a cinque* (Comment: *conoscendo certe tipe vedrai che ti mancheranno quei 3 metri*).

One of the most extended types of COVID-related humor is **allusions**. Allusions – verbal humor that relies on already existing material, using distortions and quotations. It can be considered one of the most popular types of verbal humor. And most of the allusions are related to Italian music and songs. The stereotypes about Italians as a singing nation are confirmed here.

The humorous effect of allusions is realized in the provocation of the intellectual game of establishing and recognizing unexpected links between the object of the speech and a pre-existing text – usually a product of popular culture. For example, joke about wearing masks: *Quella sua mascherina fina tanto stretta al punto che mi immaginavo tutto* – allusion the song by Claudio Baglioni “Questo piccolo Grande amore” (In original – *Quella sua maglietta fina...*) the allusions were continued in the comments: “*e quell’aria d’Amuchina / che non gliel’ho detto mai ma io ci andavo matto... Le chiare sere d’estate, / con coniugi quattro risate / e la paura e la voglia di essere immuni.*”

A humorous list of songs was also made for *Sanremo 2021*, with allusions to existing songs, in parentheses we indicate the original title of the song, so you can see the distortions that were released.

SANREMO 2021. I brani in gara

Al Bano e Romina Pandemia Canaglia (Nostalgia Canaglia)

Elio e le Storie tese – La terra di runners (La terra dei cachi)

G. Grignani – Destinazione Quarantena (Destinazione Paradiso)

M. Ranieri – Perdere il tampone (Perdere l’amore)

Little Tony – Covid Matto (Cuore matto)

A. Celentano Chi non smartworka non fa smartloving (Chi non lavora non fa l’amore)

R. Coccianti – Se siamo immuni (Se stiamo insieme)

Ron e Tosca – Vorrei incontrarti fra 3 mesi (Vorrei incontrarti fra cent’anni)

R. Vecchioni – Chiamami ancora Conte (Chiamami ancora amore)

F. Gabbani – Occidentalis Lockdown (Occidentalis Carma)

Jalisse – Fiumi di Amuchina (Fiumi di Parole)

Vasco – Vita Autocertificata (Vita spericolata)

R. Arbore – Il Lanciafiamme

Italian verbal humor appears as a reaction not only to Italian events but also to some international events. Like the Sports event held by tennis World number 1 Novak Djokovic, Adria Tour, in Serbia and Croatia where all the rules of COVID safeness were violated. As a result, some of the participants tested positive. An allusion to the song by Italian musician Morgan that became viral after the Festival San Remo 2020 appeared as a reaction to this event. Original song: *Le brutte intenzioni / la maleducazione / la tua brutta figura di ieri sera / la tua ingratitudine / la tua arroganza / fai ciò che vuoi mettendo i piedi in testa / Certo il disordine è una forma d'arte / ma tu sai solo coltivare invidia / Ringrazia il cielo sei su questo palco / rispetta chi ti ci ha portato dentro. Questo sono io* (Le brutte intenzioni, Morgan, febbraio 2020).

The version dedicated to Novak Djokovic: *Le brutte intenzioni / La poca prevenzione / La tua chiamata alla AsL / Di ieri sera / La tua lecititudine / La non curanza / Stai in quarantena come se fosse festa / Certo il vaccino ne ha curate tante / Ma tu non prendi neanche l'aspirina / Ringrazialo / Spallanzani / Se sei in questo reparto / Rispetta chi ci ha portato / Il covid sono io.*

The allusion to the famous song “Alla fiera dell'Est” (analog of the “This is the house that Jack built”) tells all the story of COVID:

Alla fiera di Wuhan, per due soldi, un pangolino mio padre comprò / E venne Conte / Che emanò il decreto / Che rinchiuse gli italiani / Che temevano il covid / Che uccise il medico / Che curò il codognese / Che cenò con cinese / Che mangiò il pipistrello / Che morse il pangolino / Che al mercato mio padre comprò.

Conclusions and prospects for further research:

As we see jokes appear as the reaction to the main processes in society, it shows the attitude of the people to these processes and has a therapeutic effect. The referential humor prevails over verbal humor in Italian jokes related to COVID-19. The decodification of the jokes requires knowledge and actualization of events in Italy during the mentioned period.

Many lexemes entered in use in the period of COVID and received new associations and allusions (*amuchina, lanciafiamme, congiunti, immuno, tampone, etc*), that is shown in the jokes. All topics and news connected with Coronavirus were presented in humor – quarantine, social distancing, masks. Some of the topics are unique and specific only for the Italian jokes as they refer to the internal events and processes – singing on balconies, the leadership of Italy, multiple changes to the forms for self-certification, the discourses of Italian politicians, etc.

The use of the first or second person singular in some of the jokes unites the original broadcaster of the enunciation to all Internet users who recognize themselves in its situation, helping to create a sense of belonging and identification.

The number of jokes with song allusions confirms the stereotype about Italians as a singing nation.

This paper represents only a brief analysis of the verbal humor related to Corona-virus. There is much work to be done in this area – to analyze the lexical component, neologisms that appeared in the period of COVID, lexical devices, and suprasegmental, morphological, syntactic and discursive features of humor.

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Abstract

Background: The article deals with Italian Internet humour related COVID-19. Language has always been the main way to react to all the processes in society. Jokes appear as the reaction, externalization of human thoughts and conceptualization. The research gives us important data on psychology, sociology, culturology, anthropology of the determined society and offers an opportunity to understand the semantic phenomena and the cognitive processes involved in producing jokes.

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to analyse the Italian verbal humour on the first wave of COVID-19 (February 2020 – June 2020).

Results: Jokes appear as the reaction to the main processes in society, it shows the attitude of the people to these processes and has a therapeutic effect. All the topics and news connected with Coronavirus were presented in jokes – quarantine, social distancing, masks. Some of the topics are unique and specific only for the Italian jokes as they refer to the internal events and processes – singing on balconies, leadership of Italy, multiple changes to the forms for self-certification, the discourses of Italian politicians, etc.

Linguistic jokes can be divided into verbal jokes (puns) and referential jokes (ironic, sarcastic and self denigrating humour, allusions, anecdotes, etc).

Discussion: Humor appears in all cultures and societies, but it's not uniform. It is more obviously embedded in sociocultural context than most other communication. Italian jokes related COVID 19 are built around specific events, cultural elements or references.

Keywords: jokes, COVID 19, verbal humour, linguistic humour, irony, pun, self denigrating humour, allusion.

Vitae

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