ФІЛОЛОГІЧНІ НАУКИ

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PROFILE OF VIRTUAL LANGUAGE IDENTITY "MODERATOR" (BASED ON ENGLISH)

Summary. The article is devoted to the linguistic study of virtual language identity "moderator", who is the key figure in Internet communication and is frequently found on Internet forums where moderation is the main factor that creates successful forum space. Moderator's main functions are enforcement of forum rules and facilitation of discussion that helps to keep the forum alive. The image of virtual language identity "moderator", that is rather positive than negative, became the object of complex linguistic analysis. Two types of moderators (authoritative moderator and ignorant moderator) were focused on and the complex pragmatic analysis of posts of these moderators is given. Verbal characteristics of moderators' posts are examined and the connection between the quality of moderation and successful communication is established.
Keywords: Internet communication, Internet forum, moderation, virtual language identity, moderator, effective communication.

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ПОРТРЕТ ВІРТУАЛЬНОЇ МОВНОЇ ОСОБИСТОСТІ «МОДЕРАТОР» (НА ОСНОВІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ)

Анотація. Статтю присвячено лінгвістичному дослідженню віртуальної мовної особистості «модератор», яка є ключовою особистістю у віртуальному просторі та стоїть в центрі комунікативної моделі в Інтернеті. Віртуальна мовна особистість «модератор» здебільшого спілкується на Інтернет форумах, де її діяльність легко прослідкується. Було встановлено, що основною передумовою ефективної комунікації модераторів є анонімність мережі, що є ключовим поняттям для Інтернет комунікації. У роботі проаналізовано імідж віртуальної мовної особистості «модератор» серед інших комунікантів, який є здебільшого позитивним та авторитетним. Проте модератори часто порівнюються з офіцерами поліції, що відбувається через те, що вони здебільшого спілкуються у форумному просторі з інвективними типами віртуальних мовних особистостей, такими як троль, спамер, флудер. Комунікативними цілями віртуальної мовної особистості «модератор» є контроль перебігу комунікації (тобто слідкувати за тим, щоб комуніканти не порушували основні форумні правила) та фасилітація комунікації (тобто розвивати дискусію та заохочувати до комунікації інших членів форумної спільноти), що є дуже важливим аспектом, оскільки це впливає на те, наскільки успішним та живим є певний форумний простір. У роботі проведений детальний прагматичний аналіз повідомлень віртуальної мовної особистості «модератор» та виявлено характерні вербальні особливості постів, які притаманні лише модераторам, такі як професійний жаргон, використання наказового способу, пом'якшуючи висловлювання маркерами ввічливості, переважання розмовного стилю в комунікації. У роботі було проаналізовано два основних типи форумних модераторів, а саме авторитетний модератор (особистість, яка сприймається іншими комунікантами безумовно) та некомпетентний модератор (особистість, яка часто ігнорується іншими комунікантами). Цей розподіл є важливим, оскільки тип модератора характеризується набором мовних засобів, які він використовує для досягнення власної комунікативної мети. У роботі визначено основні риси цих типів віртуальної мовної особистості «модератор». Аналізується зв'язок між якістю модерації та успішністю комунікації.
Ключові слова: Інтернет комунікація, Інтернет форум, віртуальна мовна особистість, модератор, успішна комунікація.

The problem under discussion. It is undeniable that state-of-the-art technologies have drastically changed the life of modern people. The communication via the Internet is steadily gaining popularity and such means as messengers (Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook Messenger), Internet forums and social networking sites prevail in youth communication. This tendency requires extensive study of profiles of virtual language identities as this issue has not been widely covered in the scientific world. Virtual language identities have a distinctive set of language means and communicative strategies and tactics that they use to communicate on the Internet. We can differentiate the following types of virtual identities: moderators, experts, trolls, off-topic speakers and consultants. Virtual language identity "moderator" is the cornerstone of Internet communication who regulates and facilitates discussion on Internet forums. Therefore, it is essential to give an in-depth analysis of its profile. In the article, we want to focus on forum communication mainly as this is the platform where virtual identity "moderator" can be easily tracked and analysed.

Recent research and publications. Language identity is considered to be a complex notion which includes the study of sociological, cultural, ethnical and psychological factors. Only diverse analysis of a personality can give the full portrait of language identity and should include such param-

eters as the level of their language as well as communicative and emotional competence [11, p. 471]. Among the linguists who analysed language identity, we can find Noam Chomsky (differentiated internal language and external language) [3, p. 63], Vynohradov V. (introduced the notion of "language identity" into linguistics) [16, p. 64], Karaulov Yu. (offered three-level structure of analyzing a language identity) [8, p. 56], Karasik V. (emphasized that language identity should be analysed considering axiological, cognitive and behavioural factors) [7, p. 22] and others. With the rapid growth of Internet communication interest in virtual identity has gradually appeared. It has been the subject of research of some foreign and domestic scholars such as Nikiforova Yevheniia (identified and examined types of virtual language identities in the English language) [13], Kompantseva Larysa (analysed Internet communication and touched some aspects of virtual identities in it) [10], Sazonova Yevheniia (studied nicknames as the main way of personality's representation on the Internet) [15], Asmus N. (analysed linguistic features of virtual space) [2], Lutovinova O. (within the frames of analysis of virtual discourse touched the issue of differentiating types of users who communicate online) [12] and others.

Previously unsolved issues of the general problem. Internet communication is being widely studied nowadays that can be seen from the variety of articles devoted to this issue. At the same time, there can be found few investigations devoted to the examination of types of personalities who interact online. There is still no clear classification of virtual language identities as well as there is no unified definition. It is clear that this topic is not fully covered in the scientific domain and it needs to be paid more attention. Analysis of linguistic means of virtual language identity "moderator" and creation of language portrait of this type of user is considered to be of high priority in linguistic studies.

The purpose of the article is to provide key information on the profile of virtual language identity "moderator" and examine main lexical and grammatical means used by moderators in their activity on Internet forums. **The subject of the study** is virtual language identity "moderator" in Internet forum communication. **The object of the study** is language means used by virtual identity "moderator" in communication on Internet forums.

Results and discussions. Virtual identity "moderator" is the person who controls the flow of communication over the Internet. Moderators can be found on Internet forums where they have some kind of authority, on social networking sites, in particular Facebook, where they regulate the activity of certain Facebook groups, and even people who have public accounts can perform the function of moderators in order not to allow offensive comments and cyberbullying.

As it was mentioned before, forum moderators have some kind of authority that is manifested in their functions. They are obliged to keep an eye on the forum members' behaviour. Forum users should stick to the following rules: members of the community should be polite and no personal attacks are allowed; one should not use overquoting while replying someone's post; forum space is not a place for any kind of advertisements so spam is

prohibited; you must not use obscene and vulgar language in your posts and replies to other members; flaming and trolling is strictly forbidden; your reply to the post should be meaningful otherwise it is considered to be off-topic speaking that is also forbidden; you are not allowed to create multiple accounts, only one registration is permitted; topics that contain controversial issues are not permitted for discussion as they may bring hostility between members; you are not allowed to dub your posts [4; 9]. These rules are universal for all forum communities but there may be some specification that is indicated in guidelines to the certain forum. For example, DigitalSpy guidelines also claim that information in posts is copyrighted and there should be a link to every video, article or whatever that the user is using. Also, they advise not to give any personal information as well as not to ask for any personal information otherwise you will be banned [4]. Once the rule is violated, moderators must issue a warning. When there is no reaction following, the moderator has the right to block the user, for the first time temporarily or permanently if the user continues to behave the same way. So, these technicalities indicate us that moderators should be authoritarian and visible on a forum space, otherwise the community will not thrive.

Speaking of Internet forums and their features, we must emphasize that anonymity is the key idea as it guarantees privacy and the freedom of speech as the government does not have right to follow virtual inhabitants [5]. Actually, anonymous communication is the foundation of the Internet communication and we may assume that moderators perform the role of "police" on Internet forums that is supported with numerous memes where moderators are pictured as police officers:

The attitude of users to forum moderators is dubious. Forum guidelines emphasize that moderators are humans, not robots and if they make a decision which you do not agree with you cannot argue with them in public [9]. Considering the fact that moderators mainly interact with negative online personalities who constantly violate rules and show disrespect and disobedience, they have to show strength and be authoritarian leaders to keep the forum space safe and calm. Furthermore, they have to be inexorable in their intention to punish misconduct. So, you may come across quite negative comments about moderators (*abusive, helpless, rude, untactful, biased, stupid, inexperienced*):

Cliquish, opinionated, manipulative, never wrong. Took arguments with the people she didn't like onto other forums. Started running the forum as if she owned it [23].

All moderators (mods) are dictators. Some are benevolent dictators, and some are cruel, insecure, envious, vindictive and petty power-trippers [20].

Moderators having some negatives features or drawbacks are often displayed on the Internet in different memes that laugh them out:

But generally authoritarian moderators have a positive image that is clearly observed, analysing lexical units in member's feedback on moderators (*positive, objective, superb, intelligent, experienced, willing to help, considerate, essential, decisive, encouraging, inspiring, powerful, highly respected, knowledgeable*):

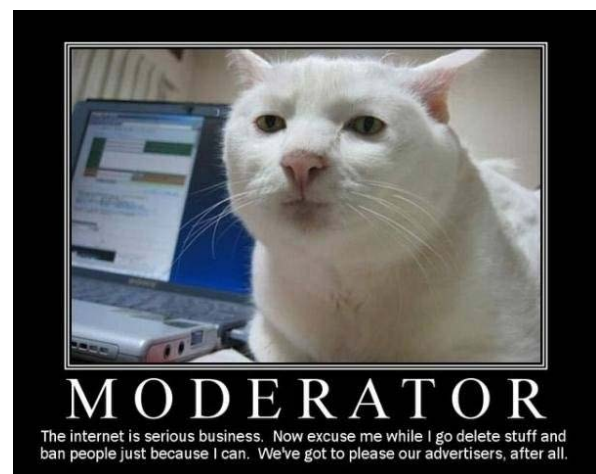Figure 1. Forum moderators as police officers [6]

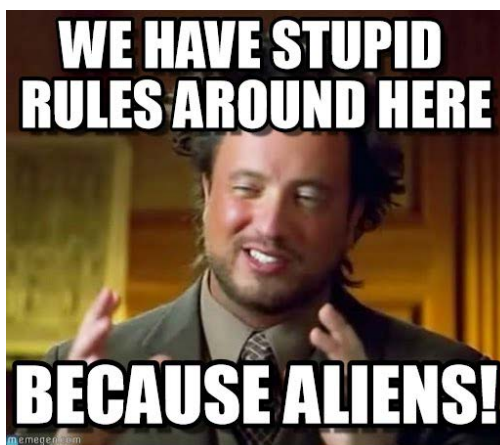

Figure 2. Negative Memes of forum moderators [6]

Community moderators are to be <u>objective, considerate and helpful</u>, as well as be <u>consistent and visible</u>. It is impossible to operate without having clear community guidelines, it is also important <u>to use your powers for good</u> [1].

Now, ACTION they take, is an action of a mod. We make decisions based on the rules of the forums. And we always try to be <u>objective</u> in that, though we are humans, not robots, and the forum rules are written in English not maths, so are also at times open to interpretation [22].

In my inexperience years ago I unwisely chose some mods. Most of my mods are <u>superb, intelligent and very experienced</u> in my niche [23].

Moderator's main function is to control and facilitate communication on forums therefore they should be authoritarian personalities. Usually, a moderator has one section of Internet forum that they carry responsibility for and monitor communication there (area moderators). Moderator's activity can be characterised by the following verbs and verbal collocation that have the connotation of control and management (*to oversee, to monitor, to watch over the forum, to ban the user, to keep trolls under control, to edit posts, to relocate discussions, to lock the discussion, to delete a thread, to close a thread, to remove irrelevant information, to issue warnings, to remove spam*):

I'm a mod on another board and if I ever have to <u>delete or censor a post</u>, I always <u>state why so the poster in question knows exactly what the infraction is so that if the poster in question cares to know, and is the sort of poster that made an honest mistake, he or she knows what behavior not to repeat [17].*

However, it's really helpful to follow the chain of command first, which mean: contact the mod who <u>closed a thread</u> first and have a civil conversation about why the decision was made. You don't know many things that involve moderating. You might not even know the rules set by admin of this board. So, ask first, then take it further. That's a civilized way <u>to resolve any conflict</u> [18].*

Numerous memes discussing the job of moderators can be found online:

Virtual language identity "moderator" is not only characterised as a member who enforces rules. They communicate on forum space to support the discussion and to enhance interaction between forum members that is supported with the following statements:

Most users believe reddit is a democracy, where everyone has a vote that's worth equally much; but that isn't true. Those who vote first have a vote which is worth more than the ones voting later on a submission. Moderators already filter the subreddits they <u>moderate quite heavily</u> (some less so than others) <u>by keeping the subreddit on-topic</u> [20].*

The primary role of a forum moderator should be to <u>promote interaction</u>. A forum moderator should be <u>posting new threads and adding new content to the site</u>. They should be helping out members with their queries and they should be keeping threads alive by asking questions [14].*

Having analysed all the available information on the Internet about moderators, it is possible to differentiate two types of moderators [13, p. 82]. **The first type** is an authoritative moderator who possesses the following qualities: visible on any type of forum, having undisputed authority, warnings of this moderator are accepted without hesitation, the moderator can easily participate in the conversation in a thread and facilitate it if they see that it goes in the wrong direction, this moderator has high linguistic competence and skills to support conversation. Authoritative moderators have a high level of visibility on Internet forums and they are highly respected by other members. One of the reasons is that they are not just issuing a warning or ban users they provide an in-depth explanation of them violating the rules: *Fair enough. Consider this an official warning for ignoring what I said about speaking down. <u>You are NOT allowed to speak down to anyone, and if I see you doing so, I will slap you with more warnings</u> and your stay here will be cut short. Are we clear? Additionally- closing your thread* [19]. Here we can see that moderator not only closes thread but also comes up with an explanation for his actions that makes him sound less categorical.

KillerMovies Community Forum is the biggest and the busiest movie forum that one can find on the Internet. There we can find several moderators as the community consists of 156,516 registered members and there you can find 408,854 threads and 17,328,582 posts [19]. That means that there should operate not one moderator but at least a team of moderators. *Ushgarak* who can be considered as authoritative moderator has been in the community since 2000 and has gained respect among its users. Moreover, the total amount of his posts is 89412 and they are declarative and dominant but he is extremely polite and communicative at the same time. He never banned a member for no reason, all his actions are explained in an extremely polite and neutral way: *your ban came after a <u>long stream of formal and informal warnings</u> and after a consensus of many area mods that you were repeatedly acting in a troublesome manner. <u>Your attempt to claim innocence and bias does not stand against</u> the multiple infractions by you as reported by several mods. The last straw was you openly defying the mods in the thread* [19]. Here we can see that Ushgarak does not simply claim that he issues a warning but he also gives proofs why he does it so he meets no opposition. Moreover, the register of his language is formal and neutral not emotionally biased.

The following posts exemplify that Ushragak tends to be polite with other members of the community using the marker of politeness *please*: *Indeed it has. <u>Please</u> do not make threads like this here; That's an official warning to Lucien for sock interaction. <u>Please</u> don't do it again* [19].

Figure 3. Memes of forum moderators [6]

As it was mentioned above, authoritarian moderators can function as facilitators of discussions. This way they can control the conversation flow and liven up discussion on the forum. Usually, authoritarian moderators do it as they have a high level of encyclopedia knowledge. The following post illustrates this statement: *Just got back – quick summary of <u>my initial thoughts,</u> no direct spoilers. Interesting film – ups and downs. My major fears about what they might do with Jedi and the Force were not realised at all – if anything, this film bucks up the classic good vs evil trend. <u>However, I can definitely see a lot of OT fans getting offended</u> that what scraps of backstory we can work out rather diminish the significance of the original films. <u>Broadly,</u> I am forming the impression that the new films are the inverse in execution to the Prequel films…..But looking at TFA and TLJ, what <u>I am feeling</u> are films that are getting all the details right – good acting, good dialogue…, some beautiful moments that make their point very well… <u>Meanwhile,</u> there's an entire section of the film that looks great, is well played out, but <u>ultimately</u> achieves absolutely nothing – the actual main story doesn't care that any of it happened. That's a bit weird [19].* Here we can see that the moderator uses complex sentences to express his thoughts and ideas (my initial thoughts, I am feeling), connectors and sentence markers (however, broadly, definitely), he tries to understand all view (I see a lot of fans offended) and the volume of the post is quite big that is peculiar to the virtual language identity "expert" [13].

The second type of moderator is an ignorant moderator who is often not accepted by community members and their warnings are frequently ignored. Moreover, this moderator is not so visible in the community's space and does not facilitate conversation in the way the authoritative moderator does. To describe the portrait of an ignorant moderator, we suggest having a closer look at posts of moderator *Paola* on KillerMovies Community Forum. Paola has been a member of the community since 2003 and she has published 18713 posts ever since [19]. So, it is obvious that she is 5 times less visible than Ushgarak. Issuing a warning, moderator Paola usually provides no explanation, so she is strict and concise: *should've give the e-mail as well… <u>closing due to irrelevance</u>; Just <u>watch</u> your language everyone; <u>closed</u> by request* [19]. As it can be seen from these posts, moderator Paola tends to use simple constructions avoiding polite markers. Using imperative mood without polite markers is considered to be rude.

Having analysed posts of this moderator, we concluded that her main communicative goal is to enforce the rules. Meanwhile, she was also noticed having chat with forum members. Have a look at the following posts: *<u>that's right</u>. I leave you guys discussing what's good and what's not, what should be done and what shouldn't, who should we ban and blah blah… <u>hope you have fun</u>…; Of all the Marvel movie verse? or <u>just waiting</u>? or Gambit? or all of the above? <u>Gosh</u>! Any news on this? Tatum guy is playing Gambit, last I heard.; … and… can someone tell me if this <u>pic</u> means she was in the Maxim <u>mag</u>? anyone seen it?* [19] We can summarize that her posts are characterised by the use of simple sentences and elliptical constructions (just

waiting? Any news on this?), usage of exclamations (Gosh!) and contractions (pic, mag) that is peculiar to the economy of language. All these verbal means are peculiar to informal style in communication and we may come to the conclusion that facilitating the discussion is not the main communicative goal of this moderator.

The language of a moderator is significantly different from the language of other forum members. The analysis of moderators' posts show that they have developed their professional jargon that can be easily understood by any forum member but new members or newbies: *mod (=moderator), ban controversial subjects, delete the post, close the thread, lock duplicate threads, ban the user, temporary ban, permanent ban, temporary suspension, elude the ban, sock interaction, a sock account, multiple accounts, kill spam, mark as spam, keep the forum clean, derail threads, have a canon policy, do not feed a troll, edit an inappropriate content, deactivate user account, mark threads as solved.* Have a look at the following post:

Robtard: No, I've said I've been banned before…

Moderator: Honestly, <u>the mods</u> have been mulling over that for a while. But the issue is that what little activity the forum has would probably slow to a crawl…So then the question becomes, well, how long do we <u>ban</u> them for. Yes, some of them are going to cry about bias or that the <u>mods</u> have some personal vendetta against them… when we really don't. I mean, don't <u>derail threads</u> and you pretty much get left alone, and you can, to an extent, say whatever you like… [19].

As we can see, the lexical unit *mod* is a contracted form of lexeme "moderator" that is frequently used by a forum member with the aim of the economy of language. The verb *ban* and its forms – *to be banned, banning, banned* as well as its noun form *ban* are quite widespread in the language of forum users and is used not only by moderators but by common users as well.

It was mentioned before that moderators are mainly considered to be authoritarian personalities and the ones having indisputable authority in a particular linguistic and cultural community. At the verbal level the dominance of moderators is expressed through the use of imperative constructions (directive speech acts), for example: *Please move that post to the movie forum where it belongs. Thank You.; You have 24 hrs to convince the mod staff you are not <u>a sock account</u>, whoever gets here <u>first bans</u> you; That's an official warning to Lucien for sock interaction. <u>Please</u> don't do it again* [19].

In the examples above, it is clearly observed that direct acts prevail in moderators' posts. The categoricalness of the posts may be reduced due to the use of politeness markers (please, thank you etc.). The warnings of moderators may not be so extended. That means that they may not always explain the reason for their decisions. Still, they try to do it as it reduces the categoricalness in communication and helps to keep the forum as a safe place.

Conclusion. To summarize, it is obvious that virtual language identity "moderator" is in the centre of a communicative model of the Internet. It interacts with all types of forum members starting from trolls and ending with experts as well as with other moderators. Virtual language identity "mo-

derator" is mainly an authoritarian personality and its image on the Internet is quite positive. Though, as a result of interaction with negative personalities such as trolls and flamers, they sometimes can be not accepted and their warnings can be disputed by other forum members. It is clear that moderators do not only enforce forum rules and punish misconduct, they communicate in the community and try to facilitate discussion, especially if they see that it goes into the wrong direction. Successful moderators are objective, fair, polite, they usually explain their decisions to reduce categoricalness of their statements, they often weigh in conversations and actively participate in the discussion, they have also developed their professional jargon that is easily understood by any forum member.

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