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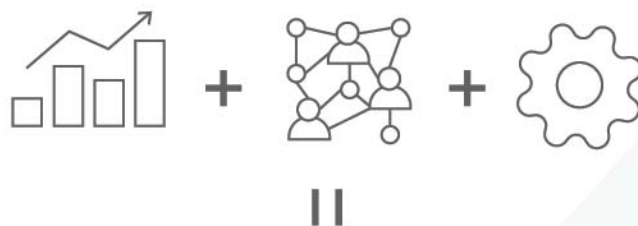
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## TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT “WAR” BY UKRAINIANS

## TRANSFORMĂRI ÎN ÎNȚELEGEREA CONCEPTULUI „RĂZBOI” DE CĂTRE UCRAINENI

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**Annotation:** The article examines the theoretical foundations of the nuclear semantics of the concept “war” within psycholinguistic and cultural discourse. An empirical study was conducted to investigate the spectrum of associative fields related to this concept in the minds of Ukrainians from different regions under the contemporary conditions of the Russian–Ukrainian war. The analysis revealed that the dominant semantic group across the entire sample is “Negative emotions and feelings”, which reflects the specific features of Ukrainian citizens’ emotional attitudes and psycho-emotional states. Over the ten-year period (starting from the beginning of the “ATO” and continuing throughout the full-scale military aggression of Russia against Ukraine), the studied concept has undergone numerous semantic transformations in the consciousness of Ukrainians. For Ukrainian citizens, the concept of “war” has acquired significant personalized tragedy in the form of “here-and-now” active emotions of “anxiety”, “pain”, and “grief”.

**Adnotare:** Articolul examinează fundamentele teoretice ale semanticii nucleare a conceptului „război” în cadrul discursului psiholingvistic și cultural. A fost realizat un studiu empiric pentru a investiga spectrul câmpurilor asociative legate de acest concept în conștiința ucrainenilor din diferite regiuni, în contextul contemporan al războiului ruso-ucrainean. Analiza a arătat că, la nivelul întregului eșantion, grupul semantic dominant este „Emoții și sentimente negative”, ceea ce reflectă particularitățile atitudinilor



emoționale și ale stării psiho-emoționale a cetățenilor ucraineni. Pe parcursul unui interval de zece ani (începând cu declanșarea „ATO” și continuând cu agresiunea militară pe scară largă a Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei), conceptul analizat a suferit numeroase transformări semantice în conștiința ucrainenilor. Pentru cetățenii ucraineni, conceptul de „război” a dobândit o semnificație puternic personalizată a tragediei, manifestată prin emoții active de tip „anxietate”, „durere” și „suferință”, trăite „aici-și-acum”.

**Keywords:** war; concept; nuclear semantics; psycholinguistic discourse; associative fields; emotional attitudes; Ukrainians; displacement; semantic transformations.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** război; concept; semantică nucleară; discurs psiholingvistic; câmpuri asociative; atitudini emoționale; ucraineni; strămutare; transformări semantice.

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## Introduction

The nuclear semantics of the concept of “war” is embodied in laws, dictionaries, specialized textbooks, manuals, articles, social advertising, and so on; it is openly or latently retransmitted through official sources and the media; it is implied in the speeches of politicians, economists, lawyers, religious and other figures. However, in Ukrainians' everyday consciousness, given the tragic events of recent years, this concept is apparently transforming much faster than we can adequately comprehend and verbalize. This applies, among other things, to Ukrainian psychologists, whose clients experience active military actions as a long-term factor of traumatization or, at the very least, a chronic stressor. Therefore, empirical research on the associative fields of the concept of “war” is significant from various aspects, not only theoretical but also practical.

In the process of cognition, individuals operate with specific linguocognitive units such as **concepts**, which emerge from the human ability to extract stable, prototypical features of phenomena from general information about the world and to systematize this knowledge accordingly. A concept is characterized by depth and multidimensionality, encompassing a broad spectrum of emotional, moral, social, and cultural components. The investigation of linguistic mechanisms for conceptualizing cultural space through concepts has become one of the key research directions in contemporary linguistics (Melnyk & Nazarenko, 2023; Prykhodko, 2008; Zinevych & Krasavina, 2017; Vasianovych, 2018, 2020; Verovkin, 2013; Chervinchuk, 2017; Tepla, 2023; Yavorska, 2016). As A. Prykhodko (2008) observes, the increasing use of the term “**linguoconcept**”, understood as a complex construct encompassing a concept, idea, meaning, and image, opens broad perspectives for examining both universal and nationally specific forms of thinking manifested in spoken and literary discourse (p. 271).

A concept, as a fundamental category of cognitive linguistics, is a mental construct that organizes human knowledge and perceptions of the world. The verbalization of concepts refers to the process through which these mental units are expressed by means of language, enabling the transmission, formation, and transformation of knowledge and ideas within a society. Consequently, the examination of concepts and their verbalization plays a crucial role in understanding the interrelation between language, thought, and communication. Verbalization makes it possible for a concept to be conveyed, interpreted, and negotiated in the course of speech interaction. A concept is often regarded as largely equivalent to a notion or idea. This identification stems from their shared cognitive foundation: both arise through apperception, grounded in internal reflective experience.

In the modern conditions of a global world, the issues of war and peace are fundamental to understanding international relations and geopolitical processes. The concepts of “war” and “peace” are among the central elements of political rhetoric, and their verbalization can have a significant influence on society (Zinevych & Krasavina, 2017; Druzhbiak & Frantsuz, 2024).

In modern linguistics, cognitive and linguocultural approaches to the study of universal concepts occupy a prominent position, one of these concepts being “war”. Certain aspects of this conceptual domain are explored in the works of O. Zhuravska (2022), T. Kots (2019), Yu. Maslova (2023), S. Melnyk and O. Nazarenko (2023), and other researchers.

At different historical periods, the concept of war acquires new semantic nuances and is characterized by new evaluative paradigms. This concept includes ideas of conflict, violence, destruction, as well as historical and cultural associations. The importance of this concept across various historical contexts for numerous nations is evidenced by studies of its semantics and structure based on data from multiple languages (Ukrainian, English, French). In particular, as demonstrated by the studies of I. Shevchenko (2022), the verbalization of the concept of “war” in the English-speaking worldview mostly has a negative connotation. The concept of “war” is an integral element of the worldview of Ukrainians as well, due to historical events that took place in the country and the current situation (Vasianovich, 2018, 2020; Chervinchuk, 2017; Tepla, 2023; Yavorska, 2016).

Thus, the concept of “war” is universal, but at the same time it is marked by a strong national character, which is influenced by the historical experience of a particular people. The complex system of linguistic representations and the means of conveying additional meanings of this concept have been shaped by the centuries-long and arduous struggle of Ukrainians for their statehood (Shevchenko et al., 2022).

It is worth emphasizing the complexity and multifacetedness of the concept. Studying the symbolism of the concept of war, the authors of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cultural Symbols of Ukraine* (2015) argue that wars are constantly taking place on our planet, and therefore war has become an integral attribute and condition of human existence. We often do not even think about the fact that we live with one or another concept of war, reflected in our subconscious culture (Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cultural Symbols of Ukraine, 2015). According to linguists, this statement serves as the basis for the extensive nominative field of the concept “war” in different linguistic cultures in general, and in psycholinguistic cultural discourse in particular. As scientific sources show, the concept is represented in language through a word – that is, the name of the concept – which most fully conveys its meaning.

In the *Comprehensive Explanatory Dictionary of Modern Ukrainian Language* edited by V. Busel (Ed., 2005), we find the following two basic definitions:

- “1. War is an organized armed struggle between states, social classes, etc.” and
- “2. A state of enmity between someone; a dispute, quarrel with someone; struggle” (p. 186).

The second definition, however, is considered to be used in a figurative sense. Thus, the direct nuclear semantics of the concept “war” encompass quite diverse and largely generalized notions such as “struggle”, “weapon”, “state”, “society”, and “organization”, while the indirect semantics are associated with negative psychological states and conflictual intersubjective relationships such as “enmity”, “dispute”, and “quarrel”.

As noted by H. Yavorska (2016), the connection between the concepts “battle, war” and “dispute, quarrel” is ancient and not coincidental: the ancient Greek name for war, *polemos* (from which the word *polemic* is derived), combined both armed and verbal battles in its meaning. The scholar analyzes and interprets contemporary cognitive (metaphorical) schemes related to the representation of war in general, and widespread in Ukrainian society in particular: “War is a destructive force (natural disaster)”, “War is an epidemic of a deadly disease”, “War is a journey”, and “War is hell (afterlife)”. The researcher emphasizes that “the name, more precisely, the choice of

a particular verbal designation, not only reflects but structures and organizes, i.e., conceptualizes the ways of understanding reality and people's attitudes towards certain events" (p. 15).

In view of the above, let us briefly consider examples of official perceptions and interpretations of "war" in Ukrainian society over the past decade.

A. Chervinchuk (2017), analyzing this concept in the national information space (based on the popular publications *Day* and *Mirror Weekly* for 2017), concludes that during that period, the concept of war (in Eastern Ukraine) was mostly replaced by terms that did not correspond to its true nature ("aggression", "conflict", "terrorism", "anti-terrorist operation") (pp. 90–98). According to E. Vasianovych (2018), this is due to the fact that both the participants in the armed conflict and the international community have not reached a consensus regarding the verbalization of this concept and the interpretation of russian aggression (pp. 5–10).

For the most part, the concept of "war" in official Ukrainian discourse has been and continues to be represented as a "military conflict". In this context, while analyzing the phenomenon of the "struggle of informational concepts", H. Kovalsky (2016) aptly emphasizes that the use of inadequate terminology leads to a misperception of the real issues by those responsible for effectively addressing them, and, consequently, results in ineffective military, political, legal, and economic responses (p. 276).

As noted by T. Kots (2019), O. Zhuravska (2022), and Y. Maslova (2023), the media promptly respond to society's attitude toward military events and record public sentiment in a synchronous manner. The study by S. Melnyk and O. Nazarenko (2023) is devoted to the linguistic representation of the concept of war in modern Ukrainian media discourse.

According to the results of the study by O. Teploi (2023), it was found that in the modern linguistic space there is a tendency to verbalize the concept of "war" in the form of a metaphor. The linguistic representation of the concept of war in journalistic texts is also reflected in various thematic groups of vocabulary. Often, authors of media texts resort to the use of figurative language means, namely aphorisms, phraseological units, paremias, and other units (pp. 92–100).

According to the study by T. Khraban (2023), in the Ukrainian segment of social networks at the beginning of 2023, the following emotional filling of the concept of "war" had formed:

- 1) emotional projections of the national perception of war;
- 2) emotional projections of the personal perception of war;
- 3) an emotional projection of war built in the minds of subjects through appealing to a significant fragment of the image of the world, by naming specific objects, phenomena, and key characteristics of stimulus-events;
- 4) the basic conceptualization of emotions at the level of conceptual generalization is carried out on the basis of the structurally organized emotional concept of "trial", which carries an ethical and moral burden within the Christian understanding of the meaning of life;
- 5) conceptual and essential emotional knowledge about war is represented in social networks in the metaphor of a test, associated with the idea of checking (diagnosing) a person's specific "way of being" through testing their value orientations (pp. 164–171).

In the context of the outlined problem, psychological research was conducted. In particular, N. Savelyuk (2024) empirically investigated the psychosemantic dimensions of the experiences of psychoemotional states by Ukrainians in war conditions. The researcher noted a significant similarity in the psychoemotional experience of life activity in war conditions among respondents from the western and eastern regions of Ukraine. In both subgroups, "Optimistic cheerfulness" was singled out as the dominant psychosemantic basis for verbalizing their own states, which for Ukrainians from front-line regions has a significant additional connotation of "strength". In contrast to the related results in the first two subsamples, it was found that in the subgroup of forced Ukrainian emigrants the dominant psychosemantic structure is "Pessimistic inhibition", which requires further in-depth study and analysis (pp. 139–143).



The study by Ya. Vasylykevych and O. Kikinezhdi (2025) is devoted to the empirical identification of the features of diagnosing emotional attitudes as an indicator of the socio-psychological adaptation of forcibly displaced persons abroad. The specificity of the system of emotional attitudes toward various aspects of the reality of forced Ukrainian migrants was revealed using the modified projective method of color metaphors (Vasylykevych, 2019). Evidence was obtained that associations with colors indeed reflect the subjects' attitudes toward life events significant to them. It was found that the attitude toward war is characterized by fear, threat, loss, and ruined plans. Forcibly displaced persons generally marked the concept of "War" in black and red. War is associated with emotional experiences marked in red: "Threat", "Aggression", "Irritation", "Anxiety", and in black: "Fear", "Pain", "Aggression". It is also accompanied by the following states, marked in black: "Loss", "Loneliness", "Uncomfortableness", "Disease" (Vasylykevych & Kikinezhdi, 2025, pp. 14–24).

According to the results of a psycholinguistic experiment conducted by S. Martynuk and V. Mitkov (2021) on a sample of Ukrainian respondents from 2012 to 2021, the most frequent initial reaction to the word stimulus "war" at that time was "death" (28 out of a total of 202 first associations). Among relatively more common verbal reactions, "sorrow" (8) and "peace" (6) are also worth mentioning. The most frequent reaction can be viewed, in our opinion, as a component of the global existential discourse of humanity, the second as an embodiment of individual traumatic experience, and the third as a verbalization of paternalistic aspirations and/or beliefs (*Ukrainian Associative Dictionary*, 2021).

In the context of our study, the works of Ye. Vasianovych (2020) and K. Blyzniuk & R. Skidchenko (2022) are of considerable interest. In particular, the psycholinguistic analysis of the associative field "war" in the linguistic picture of the world of Ukrainian humanities students conducted by Ye. Vasianovych (2020) showed that the nuclear associations were *death* (48), *tears* (31), *pain* (29), *fear* (24), and *weapons* (20) (p. 15).

In a unanimous study by K. Blyzniuk and R. Skidchenko (2022), conducted at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, it was found that respondents aged 15 to 30 named 1,522 associations to the stimulus *war*, the most frequent of which were *death*, *pain*, *fear*, *blood*, *horror*, which generally indicated a negatively connoted associative field of the specified concept. The study also refuted the classification of reactions–attributes of war as neutral. In the structure of the associative field, the most frequent reactions characterize the physical, psychological, and moral state of a person. High-frequency designations of war realities also include: the life of the civilian population, the life of the military, and various attributes of war and military actions. The researchers emphasize that at the level of the core and perinuclear zone, there is a noticeable dominance of the emotional over the visual in the minds of young Ukrainians who became direct participants or victims of the war, rather than outside observers (pp. 18–23). Thus, the revealed dynamics of associations with the stimulus *war* before and during the full-scale invasion in these studies allows us to compare the change in the corresponding perceptions of young Ukrainians.

However, the peculiarities of the verbalization of the concept "war" in contemporary psycholinguistic discourse among Ukrainians remain an underexplored scientific problem, which motivated the choice of the topic for this article.

**The aim of the article** is to theoretically substantiate the nuclear semantics and empirically study the spectrum of associative fields of the specified concept in the consciousness of Ukrainians from different regions under the conditions of the Russian–Ukrainian war.

### **Materials and methods of research**

Our empirical research was conducted at the end of spring and the beginning of summer 2023.

**Sample description:** The total number of respondents was 126 individuals from the eastern, central, northern, and western (non-occupied) regions of Ukraine, including 70 women and 56 men,

aged 17 to 64, with different social statuses (higher education students, employees in various fields, and temporarily unemployed).

**Research method:** a classical associative experiment conducted remotely using a Google form.

### Results and considerations

In total, 263 verbal associations were obtained. During subsequent content analysis, they were divided into 13 semantic groups (the number of concepts in each group and their percentage of the total number of associations are provided in parentheses).

**1. “Negative emotions and feelings” (89 / 33.85%):**

- *fear, anxiety, horror* (35 / 39.33%),
- *pain, suffering, sorrow* (32 / 35.96%),
- *anger, fury, rage* (10 / 11.24%),
- *sadness, grief, depression* (9 / 10.11%),
- and individual reactions (3.36%) – “*intolerability*”, “*stress*”, “*kaput*”.

**2. “Death and its factors” (58 / 22.06%):**

- *death, killings* (40 / 68.97%),
- *struggle, battle* (6 / 10.34%),
- *violence* (5 / 8.62%),
- *explosions* (4 / 6.90%),
- and individual expressions (5.17%) – “*catastrophe*”, “*assault*”, “*famine*”.

**3. “Destruction and loss” (43 / 16.35%):**

- *destruction, ruin* (17 / 39.5%),
- *loss, losses* (14 / 32.56%),
- *blood* (6 / 13.95%),
- *decline, degeneration* (2 / 4.65%),
- *separation* (2 / 4.65%),
- *no home* (2 / 4.65%).

**4. “Military associations” (18 / 6.84%):**

- *warrior, military* (3 / 16.67%),
- *weapons* (4 / 22.22%),
- *fight* (2 / 11.11%),
- and individual expressions (50%) – “*hero*”, “*mobilization*”, “*uniform*”, “*comrades*”, “*tanks*”, “*trench*”, “*reconnaissance*”, “*captivity*”, “*chains*”.

**5. “Neutral abstract associations” (15 / 5.70%):**

- *changes* (2 / 13.33%),
- *time* (2 / 13.33%),
- *feelings* (2 / 13.33%),
- *actions* (2 / 13.33%),
- and individual reactions (46.68%) – “*experiences*”, “*survival*”, “*politics*”, “*negotiations*”, “*strategy*”, “*animal instincts*”, “*uncertainty*”, “*exam*”.

**6. “Negative abstract associations” (10 / 3.80%):**

- *evil* (2 / 20%),
- *senselessness* (2 / 20%),
- and individual reactions (60%) – “*lawlessness*”, “*injustice*”, “*misunderstanding*”, “*enemy*”, “*victims*”, “*powerlessness*”.

**7. “Social associations” (8 / 3.04%):**

- *people* (2 / 25%),
- and single reactions (75%) – “*society*”, “*consciousness*”, “*words*”, “*unity*”, “*relatives*”, “*cities*”.

**8. “Positive abstract associations” (7 / 2.66%):**

- *greatness, strength* (4 / 57.14%),
- and individual reactions (42.86%) – “*victory*”, “*peace*”, “*soul*”.

**9. “Aggressor country” (7 / 2.66%):**

- “*Russia*”, “*Putin*”.

**10. “The past” (3 / 1.14%):**

- “*childhood*”, “*was*”, “*past*”.

**11. “The future” (2 / 0.76%):**

- “*will be*”, “*tomorrow*”.

**12. “Metaphorical associations” (2 / 0.76%):**

- “*abyss*”, “*darkness*”.

**13. “Ukraine” (1 / 0.38%).**

Now let us compare the results in the sub-samples identified in the study by the criterion “Without changing the place of residence / Internally displaced persons” (Table 1).

Table 1. Verbal reactions of respondents (Ukrainians without changing their place of residence and internally displaced persons) to the word-stimulus “war”

Ukrainians without changing their place of residence (Verbal reaction group / Base lexeme)	Internally displaced citizens (Verbal reaction group / Base lexeme)
I. “Negative emotions and feelings” (52 / 35.85%) / “ <i>Fear, anxiety, horror</i> ” (22 / 42.31%)	I. “Negative emotions and feelings” (37 / 31.36%) / “ <i>Pain, sorrow, suffering</i> ” (13 / 35.14%)
II. “Death and its factors” (35 / 24.14%) / “ <i>Death, killings</i> ” (23 / 65.71%)	II. “Death and its factors” (23 / 19.49%) / “ <i>Death, deceased</i> ” (17 / 73.91%)
III. “Destruction and loss” (25 / 17.24%) / “ <i>Destruction, ruin</i> ” (12 / 48%)	III. “Destruction and loss” (18 / 15.25%) / “ <i>Loss, losses</i> ” (7 / 38.89%)
IV. “Military associations” (9 / 6.21%) / All individual associations	IV. “Military associations” (9 / 7.63%) / “ <i>Weapons</i> ” (3 / 33.33%)
V. “Neutral abstr. associations” (5 / 3.45%) / “ <i>Uncertainty, changes</i> ” (2 / 40%)	V. “Neutral abstr. associations” (10 / 8.47%) / “ <i>Actions</i> ” (2 / 20%)
VI. “Negative abstract associations” (3 / 2.07%) / All individual associations	VI. “Negative abstract associations” (7 / 5.93%) / All individual associations
VII. “Social associations” (5 / 3.45%) / All individual associations	VII. “Social associations” (3 / 2.54%) / All individual associations
VIII. “Positive abstract associations” (7 / 4.83%) / “ <i>Greatness, strength</i> ” (4 / 57.14%)	VIII. “Positive abstract associations” (0)
IX. “Aggressor country” (2 / 1.38%) / “ <i>russia</i> ”	IX. “Aggressor country” (5 / 4.24%) / “ <i>russia, putin</i> ”
X. “The past” (0)	X. “The past” (3 / 2.54%) / All individual associations
XI. “The future” (0)	XI. “The future” (2 / 1.69%)
XII. “Metaphorical associations” (2 / 1.38%) / All individual associations	XII. “Metaphorical associations” (0)
XIII. “Ukraine” (0)	XIII. “Ukraine” (1 / 0.86%)

Thus, we can conclude that there are differences in the associative fields of the concept of “war” between the two conditionally identified sub-samples in the study. In particular, within the quantitatively dominant semantic group “Negative emotions and feelings” for the entire sample, in the subgroup of non-displaced Ukrainians, the more uncertain, diffuse “*anxiety*” (as a signal of real or projected danger) prevails, while in the internally displaced group, it is not just stress but also traumatic “*pain*” and “*sorrow*”.

### Conclusions

The theoretical foundations of the nuclear semantics of the concept “war” are examined within psycholinguistic and cultural discourse. The analysis of scholarly sources further demonstrated the diverse conceptual interpretations and the multifaceted nature of this concept. The verbalization of the concept “war” within emerging evaluative paradigms is characterized by new semantic nuances, distinct national and cultural specificity, and a predominantly negative connotation. In contemporary Ukrainian interdisciplinary research, the linguistic representation of the concept “war” is reflected through a variety of thematic lexical groups and complex semantic and structural patterns, with a clear dominance of metaphorical expressions and emotionally charged elements. These results highlight the heterogeneity of emotional and semantic representations of war in the Ukrainian linguistic worldview and underscore the profound impact of displacement on individual conceptual experience.

An empirical study was conducted to examine the spectrum of associative fields – namely, the structural and semantic content – of the concept “war” in the consciousness of Ukrainians from different regions within the contemporary realities of the Russian–Ukrainian war. The analysis revealed that the dominant semantic group across the entire sample is “Negative emotions and feelings”, which reflects the characteristics of the emotional attitudes and psycho-emotional states of Ukrainian citizens. The study also identified differences in the verbalization and conceptualization of “war” between two respondent subgroups. It was found that among non-displaced Ukrainians, a more indeterminate and diffuse sense of anxiety predominates, functioning as a response to real or anticipated danger. In contrast, among internally displaced persons, the prevailing reactions are not only stress-related but also distinctly traumatic, most commonly expressed through pain and grief.

Thus, in the period from the beginning of the “ATO”, then the “JFO”, and further during Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the concept of “war”, in the semantic dimensions of turbulent events of modern history, has undergone and continues to undergo many connotative transformations. From the predominant semantic connections with “death” as an existential component of the awareness of the inevitable end of earthly life (albeit violent in wartime) for any person, through official social discourses of “conflict”, “aggression”, and “terrorism”, “war” for Ukrainians has acquired significant personalized tragedy in the forms of specific, “here-and-now” negative affects of “anxiety”, “pain”, and “sorrow”.

We see prospects for further scientific research in scaling the sample and adding other comparative aspects (age, gender, professional characteristics).

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