

FREE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MOLDOVA
UNIVERSITATEA LIBERĂ INTERNAȚIONALĂ DIN MOLDOVA



PREOCUPĂRI CONTEMPORANE ALE ȘTIINȚELOR SOCIOUMANE
THE CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF THE SOCIO-HUMANISTIC SCIENCES

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XV

PREOCUPĂRI CONTEMPORANE
ALE ȘTIINȚELOR SOCIOUMANE

THE CONTEMPORARY ISSUES
OF THE SOCIO-HUMANISTIC SCIENCES

Chișinău • 2025

**Free International University of Moldova
Universitatea Liberă Internațională din Moldova**



**Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences
Facultatea Științe Sociale și ale Educației**

**Doctoral School of the Free International University of Moldova
Școala Doctorală a Universității Libere Internaționale din Moldova**

THE CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF THE SOCIO- HUMANISTIC SCIENCES

**Proceedings of the Scientific Conference with International Participation
15th Edition
Chișinău, 13–14 March 2025**

PREOCUPĂRI CONTEMPORANE ALE ȘTIINȚELOR SOCIO-UMANE

**Materialele Conferinței Științifice cu Participare Internațională
Ediția a XV-a
Chișinău, 13–14 martie 2025**

Chișinău – 2025

The contemporary issues of the socio-humanistic sciences. Proceedings of the Scientific Conference with International Participation. 15th Edition. Chişinău, 13-14 March 2025

Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane. Materialele Conferinței Științifice cu Participare Internațională. Ediția a XV-a. Chişinău, 13-14 martie 2025

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The content of working papers have been approved and recommended for publication by the Senate of the Free International University of Moldova, protocol nr. 8 of April 30, 2025. The responsibility for the content is entirely on the author (s).

DESCRIEREA CIP A CAMEREI NAȚIONALE A CĂRȚII DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

"Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane", conferință științifică (15 ; 2025 ; Chişinău).
Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane : Materialele Conferinței Științifice cu Participare Internațională = The Contemporary Issues of the Socio-Humanistic Sciences : Proceedings of the Scientific Conference with International Participation, Ediția a 15-a, Chişinău, 13-14 martie 2025 / director: Ilian Galben ; editors: Svetlana Rusnac, Elena Robu. – Chişinău : [S. n.], 2025 (Print-Caro). – 660 p. : fig. color, tab.

Antetit.: Universitatea Liberă Internațională din Moldova, Facultatea Științe Sociale și ale Educației, Școala Doctorală. – Texte : lb. rom., engl., rusă. – Referințe bibliogr. la sfârșitul art. – [50] ex.

ISBN 978-5-85748-157-8. – ISBN 978-5-85748-158-5 (PDF).

3(082)=135.1=111=161.1

P 91

**Indexed in Google Scholar through the National Bibliometric Instrument (IBN).
Each article is assigned a DOI through Crossref.**

Tipar: Print Caro, mun. Chişinău, str. Columna, 170

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PROVOCĂRI METODOLOGICE ÎN CERCETAREA PSIHOLOGICĂ CONTEMPORANĂ

UDC: 159.9:355.01

TRANSFORMATIONS IN UKRAINIANS' PERCEPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF "WAR" TRANSFORMĂRI ÎN PERCEPȚIA UCRAINENILOR ASUPRA CONCEPTULUI DE „RĂZBOI”

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<https://doi.org/10.54481/pcss2025.01>

Abstract. *The article provides a theoretical justification of nuclear semantics and an empirical study of the spectrum of associative fields of the concept "war" in the consciousness of Ukrainians from different regions during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Over the ten-year period (starting from the beginning of the "ATO" and during 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 has acquired a deeply personalized tragic meaning, expressed through immediate emotions such as anxiety, pain, and grief.*

Keywords: *concept, war, military conflict, consciousness, emotions, associative experiment, Ukrainian citizens*

Rezumat. *Articolul oferă o fundamentare teoretică a semanticii nucleare și un studiu empiric al spectrului câmpurilor asociative ale conceptului „război” în conștiința ucrainenilor din diferite regiuni, în timpul războiului ruso-ucrainean. Pe parcursul unei perioade de zece ani (începând cu debutul „ATO” și continuând cu agresiunea militară pe scară largă a Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei), conceptul studiat a suferit numeroase transformări*

semantice în conștiința ucrainenilor. Pentru cetățenii ucraineni, conceptul a dobândit o semnificație profund personalizată și tragică, exprimată prin emoții imediate precum anxietatea, durerea și tristețea.

Cuvinte-cheie: *concept, război, conflict militar, conștiință, emoții, experiment asociativ, cetățeni ucraineni.*

Introduction

The nuclear semantics of the concept of "war" is reflected in laws, dictionaries, specialized textbooks, manuals, academic articles, social advertisements, and other sources. It is explicitly or implicitly conveyed through official channels and mass media and echoed in the speeches of politicians, economists, lawyers, religious leaders, and other public figures. However, within Ukrainians' everyday consciousness—especially in light of the tragic events of recent years—this concept appears to be evolving far more rapidly than it can be fully comprehended or articulated. This phenomenon also affects Ukrainian psychologists, whose clients have experienced active military conflict as either a long-term trauma-inducing factor or a chronic stressor. Therefore, an empirical investigation into the associative fields of the concept of "war" holds considerable relevance, both theoretically and practically.

The aim of this article is to theoretically substantiate the nuclear semantics and to empirically explore the spectrum of associative fields related to this concept within the consciousness of Ukrainians from different regions, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Materials and Methods

The empirical study was conducted between late spring and early summer 2023.

Participants: The sample consisted of 126 individuals from eastern, central, northern, and western (non-occupied) regions of Ukraine, including 70 women and 56 men, aged between 17 and 64, with varying social statuses (university students, professionals from various sectors, and temporarily unemployed individuals).

Research method: The study employed a classical associative experiment, administered remotely via a Google Form.

Research Findings

According to the *Comprehensive Explanatory Dictionary of the Modern Ukrainian Language*, edited by V. Busel, the following two basic definitions of the concept "war" are provided:

"War is an organized armed struggle between states, social classes, etc.";

"A state of enmity between someone; a dispute, quarrel with someone; struggle" (Busel, 2005, p. 186).

The second definition is considered figurative. Thus, the direct nuclear semantics of the concept "war" encompass broad and 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, the connection between the concepts *battle, war, and dispute* 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 current 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"* (Yavorska, 2016, 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, analyzing this concept in the national information space (based on popular publications *Day* and *Mirror Weekly* from 2017), concludes that during that period, the concept of war (in Eastern Ukraine) was predominantly replaced by terms that did not correspond to its true nature—such as *"aggression"*, *"conflict"*, *"terrorism"*, and *"anti-terrorist operation"* (Chervinchuk, 2017).

In official Ukrainian discourse, *"war"* was and continues to be framed primarily as a *"military (armed) conflict"*. In this context, analyzing the phenomenon of *"information concept competition"*, H. Kovalsky rightly emphasizes that the use of inadequate terminology leads to a misunderstanding of the actual problems by those responsible for addressing them, and consequently provokes ineffective military, political, legal, and economic methods of response (Kovalsky, 2016, p. 276).

According to a psycholinguistic experiment conducted by S. Martynuk and V. Mitkov on a Ukrainian sample between 2012 and 2021, the most frequent initial reaction to the stimulus word *"war"* was *"death"* (28 out of 202 first associations). Other relatively frequent verbal reactions included *"sorrow"* (8) and *"peace"* (6). In our view, the first can be interpreted 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).

Discussion

A total of 263 verbal associations were obtained. Through subsequent content analysis, these were categorized into 13 semantic groups (with the number of responses and their percentage of the total in parentheses):

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 responses (3.36%) – *intolerability, stress, kaput*.

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 responses (5.17%) – *catastrophe, assault, famine*.

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%).

Military associations (18 / 6.84%): *warrior, military* (3 / 16.67%), *weapons* (4 / 22.22%), *fight* (2 / 11.11%), and individual responses (50%) – *hero, mobilization, uniform, comrades, tanks, trench, reconnaissance, captivity, chains*.

Neutral abstract associations (15 / 5.70%): *changes, time, feelings, actions* (each 2 / 13.33%) and individual responses (46.68%) – *experiences, survival, politics, negotiations, strategy, animal instincts, uncertainty, exam*.

Negative abstract associations (10 / 3.80%): *evil, senselessness* (each 2 / 20%) and individual responses (60%) – *lawlessness, injustice, misunderstanding, enemy, victims, powerlessness*.

Social associations (8 / 3.04%): *people* (2 / 25%) and individual responses (75%) – *society, consciousness, words, unity, relatives, cities*.

Positive abstract associations (7 / 2.66%): *greatness, strength* (4 / 57.14%) and individual responses (42.86%) – *victory, peace, soul*.

Aggressor country (7 / 2.66%): *Russia, Putin*.

The past (3 / 1.14%): *childhood, was, past*.

The future (2 / 0.76%): *will be, tomorrow*.

Metaphorical associations (2 / 0.76%): *abyss, darkness*.

Ukraine (1 / 0.38%).

We will now proceed to compare the results within the sub-samples identified by the criterion: *"Without changing the place of residence / Internally displaced persons"*.

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 abstract associations (5 / 3.45%) / <i>Uncertainty, changes</i> (2 / 40%)	V. Neutral abstract 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, notable differences can be observed in the associative fields of the concept of "war" between the two conditionally defined sub-samples. In particular, within the dominant semantic group "*Negative emotions and feelings*", non-displaced Ukrainians most frequently associate "war" with more ambiguous and anticipatory reactions such as "*anxiety*"—reflecting the perception of real or potential threat. In contrast, the internally displaced participants exhibit reactions indicative of deeper emotional trauma, with dominant associations including "*pain*" and "*sorrow*".

Conclusions

Thus, from the beginning of the "ATO", through the "JFO", and culminating in Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the concept of "war" has undergone, and continues to undergo, numerous connotative transformations within the semantic dimensions shaped by the turbulent events of contemporary history. Initially associated predominantly with "*death*"—as an existential marker of the violent, yet ultimately inevitable, end of human life—this concept has been reconfigured under the influence of official social discourses employing terms such as "*conflict*", "*aggression*", and "*terrorism*".

In the consciousness of Ukrainians, "war" has acquired a deeply personalized tragic meaning, increasingly expressed through immediate, situational negative affects such as "*anxiety*", "*pain*", and "*sorrow*". These emotional responses reflect not only individual experiences of suffering and loss but also a broader transformation in the collective perception of war as a lived and ongoing psychological reality.

Further research should aim to expand the sample and integrate additional comparative variables, including age, gender, and professional background, to deepen the understanding of how the semantic and emotional representation of war evolves across different social groups.

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