THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Ukraine

war
(війна)

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Abstract:

Ukrainian. *У цій словниковій статті розглядається взаємодія прямого та переносного значень слова **війна** в українських медіатизованих дискурсивних практиках доби пандемії Covid-19. Зокрема, проаналізовано використання метафори **«війна проти коронавірусу»** в публічних виступах та інтерв'ю Президента України Володимира Зеленського.*

*Метафоричне словосполучення **«війна проти коронавірусу»** не набуло такого поширення в офіційних, політичних, медійних дискурсивних практиках України, як у західних країнах. Це зумовлене насамперед тим, що починаючи з 2014 року Україна змушена стримувати на сході країни військову агресію Російської Федерації. Упродовж 2020-2021 рр. слово **війна** в публічних та особистих дискурсах українців активно використовується передусім не в метафоричному, а в прямому, денотативному значенні – **війна** як збройний конфлікт на сході України.*

English. *This entry examines the role of the metaphor **«war against the coronavirus»** in Ukrainian media discursive practices during the Covid-19 pandemic era. Specifically, the use of the metaphor in President Zelensky's public speeches and interviews was analyzed. In general, the metaphor **«war against the coronavirus»** has not become as widespread in Ukrainian official, political, and media discursive practices during 2020-2021 as in other Western countries. The word **war** in public and personal discourses of Ukrainians was used primarily not in a metaphorical sense, but in a direct, denotative sense: the war is seen as the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and as the resistance to external Russian aggression.*

Etymology:

The academic Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language testifies that the word *війна* (*war*) can be used literally and metaphorically: «1. Організована збройна боротьба між державами, суспільними класами тощо. 2. *перен.* Стан ворожнечі між ким-небудь; суперечка, сварка з кимсь; боротьба» («1. Organized armed struggle between states, social classes, etc. 2. *fig.* A state of enmity between someones; a dispute, quarrel with someone; struggle») (Словник української мови, 1970, т. 1, с. 669).

According to the Etymological Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language, the noun *війна* (*war*) has a common origin with the noun *воїн* (*warrior*) (borrowing from the Old Slavonic language) and the verb *воювати* (*to fight*), related to *вина* (*fault*) (c.f. Russian *повиноваться* (*to obey*)). The ancient Indo-European root meant «прагнути, домагатися, гнатися» («strive, demand, pursue») (Етимологічний словник, 1982, с. 397, 416, 431).

Cultural specificity:

During the years 2020-2021, **the metaphorical use** of the noun ***war*** to denote **the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic** became widespread in the political discourses of many countries. In an attempt to mobilize society to fight the disease, such a figurative expression was used by heads of states and governments of many countries, leaders of international organizations.

This general global trend of using «military» metaphors in anti-epidemic discourse has a certain specificity of implementation in different countries, such as Italy, Bulgaria, and Greece.

Problematization:

It is known that key metaphors in discursive practices affect the individual and mass consciousness, form a certain picture of the world, model the patterns of perception of reality and human activity (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Researchers from various countries have strongly warned against the use of «military» rhetoric in anti-epidemic discourses. Conceptualizing a situation as «war» can make people feel more nationalistic, xenophobic, ready to suspend civil rights and vulnerable to political exploitation (Mitchell, 2020). Metaphors of war can lead to increased public anxiety and even aggression against people accused of spreading the virus. Under the influence of such discursive practices, seriously ill people with Covid-19 can experience an additional moral burden, feel like «victims of the aggressor», and experience guilt for the supposedly «lost» war.

The metaphor of war against Covid-19, although it evokes meanings of resistance and heroism, but at the same time reveals other associations, namely 'confrontation', 'obedience', and 'enemy'. In such complex healthcare emergency situations, there is a need for other concepts, specifically 'care', 'empathy', and 'solidarity' (Sabucedo et al., 2020). According to the researchers, the metaphor of war is inadvisable because it omits fundamental factors of mutual care and empathy and therefore causes breakdowns both in social behavior and in the democratic system in general. The motives that guided the generous actions of countless people in times of crisis «should include notions like solidarity, empathy and moral obligations. Therefore, the metaphor of war should be replaced by another one whose core cognitive and emotional features are care for others and cooperation» (Ibid.).

What are the peculiarities of using the metaphor of ***«war against the coronavirus»*** in the official, political, media discursive practices of modern Ukraine, taking into account the socio-historical, political, cultural contexts of the country?

Communication strategies:

Since 2014, Ukraine had been forced to restrain the military aggression of the Russian Federation in the east of the country. Therefore, during 2020-2021, Ukraine experienced two protracted crises at the same time: the long-drawn-out military conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2019, a new President Volodymyr Zelensky was elected in Ukraine. The rhetoric of his public speeches at first was largely based on show business technologies, in particular the techniques of humorous and satirical discourses (as Volodymyr Zelensky had considerable previous professional experience in the entertainment industry).

After the end of the first wave of the epidemic, at a press conference dedicated to the results of the first year of his presidential term (May 20, 2020), Volodymyr Zelensky expressed confidence that the country had coped with a serious crisis related to Covid-19. He praised the work in this area, his own and of the Prime Minister Denis Shmygal: *«...**we are masters of sports** in the fight against coronavirus. I'm sure of it. Take the statistics».*

However, such «sports» rhetoric contrasted too much with the seriousness of the epidemic situation in Ukraine. This statement of the President was considered a sign of an inexperienced politician's overconfidence and was severely criticized precisely on the basis of statistical indicators, to which Volodymyr Zelensky himself appealed (for example, in the publication of the online media Texty.org.ua, which specializes in data journalism, or in the analytical article of Radio Liberty Ukraine).

Later on, President Zelensky's anti-epidemic discourse became much more serious. This was manifested, in particular, in the use of **«military» rhetoric** in that discourse.

August 2020. In his speech on the occasion of the Independence Day of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky builds on the «military» metaphor, drawing a parallel between the spheres of reality: **war – pandemic – economic crisis**: *«Ми будуємо саме таку країну! Країну, яка завжди **готова дати відсіч**. І байдуже, **хто атакує: агресор, вірус, світова криза**»* (*«We are building just such a country! A country that is **always ready to fight back**. And it doesn't matter **who attacks: the aggressor, the virus, the global crisis**»*).

December 2020. In the President's interview for the publication in «Focus», the metaphor develops and branches out. Starting from the direct statement according to the model *«S is P»*: ***«Коронавірус – це війна»*** (***«Coronavirus is war»***) – to the defining in the subsequent story the directions of hard work as a struggle. The President explains the change of the three health ministers by *the psychological «killing force»* of the virus: *«I consider that **the virus killed the ministers psychologically**. They couldn't do the job very quickly, not because they were bad, but because they were ministers at the time».*

Then, in the full interview, the President's discourse of **the struggle for a vaccine** develops further.

The metaphor of war was completely legitimate, first of all, **in the discourse of the physicians themselves**, in their professional assessment of the situation:
*«… **we are here just like at war. Doctors, nurses, paramedics – all work** for the good to help people»* (March 2021);
*«You have to gather strength even in spite of tears: you came out crying – and you go to the sick again. **We now have two frontlines – at the battle line and in medicine**»* (September 2021).



У Львові показали відео з COVID-лікарні

Subversion:

In general, the metaphor ***«war against the coronavirus»*** has not become as widespread in Ukrainian official, political, and media discursive practices during 2020-2021 as in Western countries (for example, in Italy and Bulgaria; see also (Bates, 2020; Mitchell, 2020)). The word ***war*** in the public and personal discourses of Ukrainians was used primarily not in the metaphorical, but in the direct, denotative sense: ***war*** as ***the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine***, as ***the resistance to external Russian aggression***.

An indicator of this state of public consciousness can be awarding the national prize «Global Teacher Prize Ukraine» in 2021 for the first time in the nomination *«Teacher Working in a Combat Zone»*. The writer Serhiy Zhadan, who presented the award to a teacher from a combat zone, stressed: *«Teachers of Donetsk and Luhansk regions hold an equally important **line of defense**».* The winning teacher herself noted: *«This is the first of such nomination. And my most cherished dream is for it to be the last. That we never had **teachers working in a combat zone**. And we were just **teachers of Ukraine**»*.

Although the writer's speech uses metaphor (*«an equally important **line of defense**»*), in this situation the emphasis is on the literal meaning of the word **war** and of the phrase ***«a combat zone»***.


Виступ Президента України Володимира Зеленського на загальних дебатах 75-ї сесії Генеральної Асамблеї ООН

Speaking at the debate of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2020, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky focused on the growing challenges to modern world security and the situation of war that Ukraine has been experiencing since 2014: *«I speak of this as the Head of State in which **the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula** in the 21st century. A state that has been deterring **its military aggression in Donbas** for seven years. How would the founders of the United Nations feel if they learned that 75 years later there would be **a war in central Europe**?»*.

The metaphorical phrases *«битва вакцин» та «битва за вакцину» («battle of vaccines» and «battle for the vaccine»)* were also involved in the sphere of information warfare in Ukraine.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has the character of **a hybrid war**. The armed confrontation is accompanied by hard propaganda and constant information attacks. **The concept of 'war'** in the minds of modern Ukrainians is primarily associated with countering Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine and information warfare.

Discussion:

What is your opinion on the following issues:

- How can a situation of **aggression by another country and protracted armed conflict** affect society's perception of the semantics of the words *war, weapons, attack, defense, resistance,* etc.?
- How are the phenomena of **information warfare** and **hybrid aggression** able to rebuild the mass consciousness?
- What can be the specifics of the perception of the metaphor ***«war against the coronavirus»*** by different segments of the population, if the country is in a state of protracted armed conflict and external information aggression?

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