SUBCONCEPT OF “WAR IN UKRAINE” IN LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF UKRAINIANS AND RUSSIANS VIA THE ASSOCIATIVE EXPERIMENT

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Recent studies have shown that the concept of “War” has changed its content structure [1]. The most active changes were caused by Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, which modified the notional, figurative and value components of the concept. For instance, the notional component of the concept of “War” was supplemented by newly-formed “postmodern subconcepts” [2], such as the Syrian civil war, the Russo-Georgian War, the Russo-Ukrainian War, as well as the proxy war, the hybrid war, the battle of narratives, and the diffused war. Taking into account that “both mental and conceptual spaces are essences of the same level” [3], the study of the newly coined subconcepts can shed light on what people in Ukraine and Russia think about Russia’s War in Ukraine.

The paper presents an empirical study of the subconcept of “War in Ukraine” based on the free-associative experiment. The key benefit of the approach selected is the capacity to expose the participant’s conceptual mind-map by going through the watchtowers of awareness, which contain all of the societal constraints and protective mechanisms of the psyche. The experiment was held in 2018 with 40 Russian-speaking participants (aged from 14 to 64) from three Ukrainian regions (the West (Rivne), the Center (Poltava and Kyiv), and the East (Donetsk)) and two Russian regions (Moscow and St. Petersburg). The study comprises responses from 200 respondents who were asked to write down their first thoughts in response to the stimulus of “War in Ukraine.” To show the structure of the subconcept, the obtained responses (384) were grouped into semantic clusters and then arranged into three conceptual layers – core, basic and peripheral. The achieved graphs are available in my recent work [4].

The findings reveal that some associative fields of the concept differ significantly even across the country. The survey, however, confirms that participants from central and western Ukraine, as well as those from Russia and eastern Ukraine, share the same view of the War in Ukraine. Thus, most Ukrainians, including majorities of central (17%) and western Ukraine (34%), associate the war with Eastern Ukraine, especially with Donbas, Luhansk, and the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics. For them, the ongoing conflict with Russia is a real war. It is also
confirmed by the direct responses (Ukrainian war, Russia, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Russian troops, violating of the Minsk Agreements, hybrid war), emotional responses (fear, fear for one’s life, horror, vanity, indifference), and also the responses, which are part of semantical clusters of “Death” and “Destruction” (destruction, dead land, killing Ukrainian elite, the extermination of the population). It suggests that the residents of these Ukrainian regions conceptualise the conflict as a genuine war rather than an “anti-terrorist operation” against pro-Russian rebels or a Joint Forces Operation.

Four per cent of central Ukrainians believe that conflict and entropy are inextricably linked: it is reflected in the concept’s structure, notably in the semantic cluster “Chaos,” which is characterized by responses like blindness, nebulosity, and crisis. Approximately 7% associate the War in Ukraine with a simulacrum; it is borne out by the following responses: nonsense, bullshit, meaningless and far-fetched. Almost two-tenths of respondents from central (16%) and western (17%) Ukraine see a link between the conflict and government leaders earning financial and personal gains. Thus, many polled see the Ukrainian conflict as a power struggle, a struggle for governmental legitimacy, or a confrontation between authorities; some associate it with money, money laundering, business, and corruption. A large majority, 53% in Moscow and 42% in St. Petersburg share the same view.

Approximately one-third of Eastern participants (35%) associate Russia’s invasion of Ukraine with civil or fratricidal war – “one in which people kill members of their society or social group” [5, 673]. Almost two-tenths of those polled (22%) believe that the War in Ukraine is unofficial, if not non-existent. The most prevalent responses are: there is no war, there is no war in Ukraine, and undeclared war. These beliefs are consistent with Russian remarks blaming Ukrainians, the US, and the EU for the War in Ukraine. According to the findings, pro-Russian narratives misrepresent the picture of Ukraine and the continuing conflict in the East. The responses with objections (there is no war), interrogative questions (is it a war?), or declarations (it is a war!) made it apparent. 10% indicated that the conflict was not theirs but someone else’s. It is worth noting that these results are remarkably identical to those obtained from respondents in Moscow (12%).

Overwhelmingly, Russians provide two narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war. The first is a “political race” (the Ukrainian government’s struggle for political influence and financial gain), while the second is a “civil war for independence.” Approximately four-in-ten respondents in Moscow (53%) and St. Petersburg (42%) believe that the Ukrainian conflict is a struggle for power, money, and leadership. A comparable number of Muscovites (19%) and Petersburgers (26%) believe it is a fratricidal conflict launched by volunteer armed forces seeking territorial independence. Furthermore, Russian respondents deny that Russia has invaded Ukraine. Residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg hold nearly identical views on the War in Ukraine, believing it is sponsored by the West and the United States. The majority of people believe it is a Western-backed military coup and that America is undermining the international order to enhance its influence. Only one respondent from each Russian region wrote about Russia’s assault on Ukraine.

The findings show that the linked domains of the subconcept of “War in Ukraine” differ significantly across Russian speakers across Ukraine and Russia. While Russians call Russia’s invasion the “Ukraine civil war,” Ukrainians call it “Russian
aggression against Ukraine.” Unfortunately, people in the East have accepted Russia’s narrative matrix, believing that the conflict is fratricidal; on the other hand, people in central Ukraine see the war through the conceptual prisms of simulation/simulacra, referring to it as something fictional, something that does not exist. Almost 10% of east Ukrainians, the bulk of whom have been subjected to a Russian-backed assault since 2014, prefer to ignore the conflict, arguing it is not theirs. The lack of a unified conceptual framework for comprehending events in Ukraine is the cause of ordinary folks’ disordered worldview.

The findings reveal that Russian propaganda uses the resources of the information war and installs its narrative schemes, even in the brains of the people who live in the territory it has occupied. Consequently, the notion layer of the subconcept has not been established yet, and there is a risk of implementing the enemy’s narrative schemas into its structure. Therefore, it is essential to appropriately portray events in eastern Ukraine to Ukrainians and people of other countries.

References: