
LEXICAL SEMANTIC REPRESENTATIONS
OF CULTURAL DOMINANTS
IN A COMPARATIVE ASPECT

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INTRODUCTION

All languages construct an experience using words whose significance goes beyond what they directly refer to. Such words are termed cultural dominants, and they function as condensed forms of carriers of the culture of the society¹. The speaker using one of these words never pauses to give it all its content; nevertheless, the word works effectively because it influences the way the listener within the same community views the event in terms of how it should be experienced and interpreted. Ethnolinguists and cultural linguists have for a long time been maintaining that these words do not lend themselves easily to translation because their semiotic system is linked to a certain worldview and not to some objective reality². One of such examples is the Ukrainian word *доля*, which means *fate* or *destiny* in English³. While in English, the word denotes some abstract power that acts on an individual, in Ukrainian, there is a sense of resignation, storytelling and even personification associated with the word in question.

The problem raised in this chapter derives from issues noticed in practice in the process of translation, language teaching and intercultural communication training. Native speakers of English and Ukrainian usually do not take into account the differences in the value load of the words they use for both everyday and specific purposes. Furthermore, they may give the words' exact denotation but culturally poor translations. Contrastive linguistics has considered certain

¹ Bromhead H., Ye Z. (Eds.). *Meaning, Life and Culture: In conversation with Anna Wierzbicka*. ANU Press, 2020. P. 9. <https://doi.org/10.22459/MLC.2020>

² Sinha C. Culture in language and cognition. *The Routledge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*/ X. Wen & J. R. Taylor (Eds.). Routledge, 2021. P. 387.

³ Кононенко В. І. Концепти українського дискурсу. Київ, Фітосоціоцентр, 2004. С. 88.

discrepancies from the viewpoint of grammar and phonology but not lexical semantics which encodes cultural values to the greatest extent⁴.

This study is based on several academic traditions, and before embarking on a detailed analysis, it is worth briefly outlining how each of them contributes to it. Ethnolinguistics, represented in Ukrainian scholarship by works on the linguistic worldview, regards lexemes as windows into a community's conceptual system, arguing that lexis and grammar together encode the customary way of segmenting and evaluating reality⁵. This tradition provides the fundamental premise underpinning the entire chapter, namely, lexical differences between languages are often not random gaps, but genuine evidence of conceptual divergences. Cognitive linguistics, and in particular the theory of conceptual metaphor, explains how abstract domains such as time, emotions or morality are structured through concrete bodily and cultural experience, which, in turn, shapes the lexical repertoire available to native speakers. This tradition provides an analytical framework, as it enables researchers to pinpoint precisely which source domain a particular culture uses to structure an abstract target domain, and to compare source domains across languages, rather than simply noting that meanings differ⁶. Cultural linguistics posits that cultural conceptualizations, understood as shared cognitive structures such as cultural schemata, categories and metaphors, are widespread within a language community and only partially accessible through individual introspection; which is why a comparative lexical analysis of numerous texts and speakers is necessary, rather than relying on the intuition of a single native speaker. This tradition serves as a reminder of methodological caution: a single example, however striking it may be, cannot prove that a particular meaning is truly cultural rather than individual⁷. The approach based on a natural semantic metalanguage offers yet another useful tool, as it aims to define even words laden with cultural meaning using a small set of universal semantic 'building blocks', enabling the researcher to clearly identify which components of meaning are common to different languages and which are specific to a particular language⁸. This tradition provides a precise tool – a method for identifying the common core and the distinctive elements in a form that is not limited merely to rephrasing the problem in other words.

⁴ Sharifian F. *Cultural Linguistics. Cultural conceptualisations and language*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. P. 26. <https://doi.org/10.1075/clsc.8>

⁵ Жайворонюк В. В. *Українська етнолінгвістика. Нариси*. Київ, Довіра, 2007. С. 11.

⁶ Kövecses Z. *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. P. 58. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859127>

⁷ Sharifian F. *Cultural Linguistics. Cultural conceptualisations and language*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. P. 27. <https://doi.org/10.1075/clsc.8>

⁸ Wierzbicka A. *Semantics. Primes and Universals*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

The aim of this chapter is to compare the lexical semantic structure of a set of cultural dominants in the Ukrainian and English languages, as well as to determine which components of meaning are shared and which are specific to each language, and how discursive practice alters these meanings over time. The objectives include defining the concept of a ‘cultural dominant’ in operational terms suitable for contrastive analysis; selecting a practical list of dominants for the ‘Ukrainian–English’ language pair; analysing their semantic structure using dictionaries, corpora and phraseology; tracing how political, media and everyday discourse has reshaped this structure over recent decades; and drawing conclusions relevant to translation practice, lexicography and intercultural training. The material for analysis includes lexicographical sources, collections of idioms and illustrative examples drawn from public discourse in both languages. This section does not claim to provide an exhaustive list of Ukrainian or English cultural dominants, as such a list would require a much larger corpus-based project; however, it aims to demonstrate a procedure that can be applied to dominants and language pairs beyond those considered here.

It is worth noting at the outset what this chapter does not cover. It does not offer a psycholinguistic analysis of how individual speakers process cultural dominants in real time, as this would require experimental methods that go beyond a discourse-based lexical semantic study. Nor does it attempt to give a comprehensive historical etymological analysis of every word discussed, as etymology and contemporary cultural meaning, whilst interrelated, are not identical, and a word’s current evaluative connotations may differ significantly from its historical origins. Instead, this chapter focuses primarily on synchronic lexical semantic analysis grounded in diachronic observation of discourse; that is, it addresses what a word means today and how recent public communication reinterprets that meaning, rather than tracing the word’s earliest recorded usage.

1. Theoretical foundations for identifying cultural dominants in lexical semantics

A cultural dominant is understood as a lexical unit whose core meaning includes an evaluative or axiological component derived from the practices, history and social organisation of the community that uses it⁹, and whose semantic structure therefore cannot be fully captured through translation into another language without certain level of loss or distortion. This definition brings together the ideas of several academic schools that have examined the

⁹ Levisen C., Waters S. (Eds.). *Cultural Keywords in Discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017. pp. 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.277>

same phenomenon under various names, including ‘linguistic worldview’, ‘cultural keyword’ and ‘cultural conceptualisation’, and it is worth considering each of these terms separately before suggesting how they are interrelated.

The notion of a linguistic worldview, developed in Ukrainian ethnolinguistics, holds that the vocabulary and grammar of a language together encode a particular way of segmenting and evaluating reality that differs, sometimes subtly and sometimes sharply, from the way other languages segment the same domain¹⁰. As part of this tradition, scholars have paid close attention to words that have no direct equivalent, viewing their absence in other languages as evidence of a genuine conceptual difference rather than a mere lexical gap. This approach also emphasises that a linguistic worldview is not a museum exhibit, fixed at some earlier stage in the history of a language, but a living structure that is constantly being recreated and modified through everyday usage, folklore, literature and, increasingly, through the mass media and digital media. The concept of ‘cultural dominant’, as used in this study, narrows this broader concept down to terms that additionally carry a strong evaluative connotation, since not every culture-specific word functions as a unit that conveys a particular value. For example, a technical term denoting a traditional craft may be culture-specific without carrying any axiological connotation in the sense intended here, whereas a word such as *доля* or *воля* carries a value judgement embedded in its very meaning.

Cognitive linguistics explains the mechanism by which such words acquire an extended meaning. The theory of conceptual metaphors shows that abstract domains, particularly moral and emotional ones, are structured through correspondences with more concrete source domains, and that the choice of source domain itself depends on cultural characteristics¹¹. A community that conceives of the life journey through the source domain of the ‘road’ forms different phrases and idioms from one that conceives of the same journey through the source domain of the ‘river’ or ‘field’, and the resulting words incorporate the connotations of their source domain even when speakers are no longer aware of the underlying metaphor. This point is significant for contrastive lexical semantics, as it implies that two words which, at the level of a bilingual dictionary, appear to be direct equivalents may nevertheless activate different networks of associative images, and this difference is reliably reflected in collocations and idioms even when individual dictionary definitions appear identical. Recent extensions of conceptual metaphor theory also argue that metaphorical correspondences are not uniform across the entire language

¹⁰ Голубовська І. О. Етнічні особливості мовних картин світу. Київ, Логос, 2004. 283 с.

¹¹ Kövecses Z. Metaphor and Emotion. Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling. Cambridge University Press, 2003. pp. 250–270.

community, but vary depending on context, style of speech and even individual experience¹², which means that comparative studies must take into account the range of variation within a single language and must not treat either Ukrainian or English as internally homogeneous.

Cultural linguistics extends this cognitive framework to the level of the language community, introducing the concept of cultural conceptualisation, understood as a cognitive structure, for example, a schema, category or metaphor, which is shared amongst members of the community and is embodied, reinforced and modified through linguistic usage. This paradigm is particularly useful for cross-cultural comparison, as it treats meaning as a matter of degree and prevalence, rather than as an ‘all-or-nothing’ property that corresponds to observable reality: most cultural dominants are only partially shared by related languages, such as Ukrainian and English, rather than being entirely identical or entirely distinct. Cultural linguistics also emphasises an empirical methodology underpinned by corpus data¹³, as claims regarding shared cultural conceptualisations cannot be based on a single example or on the analyst’s own intuition regarding their native language; this methodological approach, which this chapter endeavours to follow, draws on a combination of lexicographical, phraseological and discursive data, rather than on any single source in isolation.

Another methodological resource is the ‘natural semantic metalanguage’ programme, which constructs definitions of words, including those with cultural connotations, using a limited set of semantic ‘basic units’ that are considered universal. Applying this method to a word such as *доля* allows the researcher to pinpoint exactly which components (for example, the notion that something happens to a person, because it is bound to happen) are shared with the English *fate*, and which components (such as the stronger suggestion of a collective narrative and personification found in Ukrainian folklore) are additional and specific to the language. Such precision is valuable for translation practice since it allows the translator to pinpoint exactly where meaning should be added or omitted, rather than leaving discrepancies implicit; it is also valuable for lexicography, as it offers a template for writing dictionary entries that clearly indicate cultural connotations, rather than treating a culturally dominant word as if it were semantically equivalent to its closest counterpart.

A further methodological resource comes from the natural semantic metalanguage programme, which builds definitions of words, including culturally loaded ones, using a restricted set of semantic primes considered

¹² Geeraerts D., Kristiansen G., Peirsman Y. (Eds.). *Advances in Cognitive Sociolinguistics*. Walter de Gruyter, 2010. P. 8.

¹³ Stefanowitsch A. *Corpus linguistics. A guide to the methodology*. Language Science Press, 2020. P. 254. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3735822>

to be universal, such as *good, bad, want, feel, people* and *think*¹⁴. Applying this method to a word like *доля* allows the analyst to state precisely which components, for instance an idea that something happens to a person because it was meant to happen, are shared with the English *fate*, and which components, such as a stronger implication of communal narrative and personification found in Ukrainian folklore, are additional and language-specific. Such precision is valuable for translation practice, as it allows the translator to pinpoint exactly where meaning should be added or omitted, rather than leaving discrepancies implicit; it is also valuable for lexicography, as it offers a template for writing dictionary entries that clearly indicate cultural connotations, rather than treating a culturally dominant word as if it were semantically equivalent to its closest counterpart.

Ukrainian academic research on discourse and concept analysis complements these approaches, demonstrating how cultural dominants are activated, reinforced or reinterpreted in the actual process of text production, particularly in political and media discourse, where the same lexeme may carry different evaluative connotations depending on the speaker's intentions and the audience's expectations¹⁵. This discourse-oriented approach is valuable for this research, as a purely lexicographical or etymological approach would fail to take into account the fact that cultural dominants are living, contested categories whose meanings shift depending on historical circumstances, which is discussed in greater detail in the third subsection below.

Taken together, these four traditions offer a working procedure for identifying and describing cultural dominants. Firstly, we identify potential lexemes on the basis of their frequency of use, prominence in idioms and proverbs, and apparent difficulty in translation. Secondly, we compare dictionary definitions in both languages to establish a common referential core. Thirdly, we examine collocation and phraseological patterns to identify the metaphorical source domain or domains that structure this word in each language. Fourthly, we use a decomposition based on semantic primitives to pinpoint exactly which components of meaning are shared and which are additional ones. Fifthly, we examine contemporary discourse, particularly political and media discourse, to establish how the evaluative connotation of the word has changed or is currently changing. This five-stage procedure forms the basis of the comparative analysis presented in the following chapter and is proposed in the concluding chapter as a model that can be applied to other language pairs and other dominants.

¹⁴ Goddard C. *Semantic Analysis. A Practical Introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, 2011. P. 66.

¹⁵ Zhabotynska S. Narrative, concept, and metaphor in information warfare. *Cognition, Communication, Discourse*, 2015, (10), 62–89. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2218-2926-2015-10-04>

2. Comparative analysis of selected cultural dominants in Ukrainian and English

This section applies the theoretical framework outlined above to a set of cultural dominants chosen for their frequency, their salience in everyday and literary discourse and their resistance to direct translation. The dominants examined are *доля* and *fate*, *дім*, *домівка* and *home*, *родина* and *family*, *воля* and *freedom*, *душа* and *soul*.

Доля and fate

The Ukrainian *доля* and the English *fate* share a core meaning describing an outcome attributed to a force beyond a person's control. Dictionary definitions in both languages converge on this component, and at the level of a semantic prime based decomposition both words can be glossed roughly as something that happens to a person because it was meant to happen rather than because the person made it happen. Corpus and phraseological evidence, however, reveal a divergence in the surrounding semantic field that a bare dictionary gloss conceals. Ukrainian phraseology treats *доля* as an animate, almost personal entity capable of giving, taking away or forgetting a person, as seen in expressions where *доля* is said to smile on someone or to turn away from them, a pattern extensively documented in Ukrainian folklore studies and phraseological symbolism research. This personification is not merely a poetic flourish confined to literary registers, it appears in everyday speech, in folk songs, in proverbs, and in the way ordinary speakers narrate misfortune and good fortune, describing *доля* as something one can complain to, plead with or thank.

The Ukrainian word *доля* and the English word *fate* share a common core meaning (cf. “хід подій, збіг обставин, напрям життєвого шляху, що ніби не залежать від бажання, волі людини”¹⁶, “a power that some people believe causes and controls all events, so that you cannot change or control the way things will happen”¹⁷), describing an outcome attributable to a force beyond human control. Dictionary definitions in both languages coincide on this point, and at the level of semantic analysis based on core meanings, both words can be roughly explained as that which happens to a person because it was meant to happen, rather than because the person brought it about themselves. However, corpus and phraseological data reveal a divergence in the surrounding semantic field, which is obscured by the dry dictionary definition. Ukrainian phraseology treats *доля* as a spiritual, almost personal entity capable of bestowing, taking away or forgetting a person, as evidenced by expressions in which it is said that

¹⁶ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8F>

¹⁷ Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fate>

‘fate smiles’ upon someone (“доля усміхається (посміається) / усміхнулася (посміхнулася) кому”) or ‘turns away’ from them (“обійдений долею”) – this model is widely documented in studies of Ukrainian folklore and phraseological symbolism. This personification is not merely a poetic device confined to literary genres; it can be found in everyday speech, in folk songs and proverbs, as well as in the way ordinary people talk about misfortune and good luck, describing ‘fate’ as something one can complain about, turn to, or give thanks for.

English *fate* participates in a comparatively narrower phraseological set, most often collocating with verbs of sealing, deciding or meeting, which foreground finality rather than ongoing relationship. A person’s fate is sealed, met, or accepted, but rarely addressed as though it were a companion capable of listening (“to seal one’s fate”, “to resign oneself to one’s fate”, “to accept one’s fate”). This difference supports the claim, made within conceptual metaphor theory, that the two languages draw on different source domains for the same target domain, Ukrainian favouring a person or companion metaphor and English favouring a decree or verdict metaphor¹⁸. The decree metaphor implies an external authority that pronounces judgment once, whereas the companion metaphor implies an ongoing relationship that can change over the course of a life, which helps explain why Ukrainian speech more readily allows expressions describing *доля* as changing, softening or hardening toward a person over time, while English speech more readily allows expressions describing a single moment when one’s fate was decided.

A further point of divergence concerns agency and blame. Ukrainian discourse frequently uses *доля* to soften responsibility, attributing an outcome to *доля* rather than to the person’s own choices, a rhetorical move that carries a distinctly fatalistic cultural inflection sometimes discussed critically within Ukrainian cultural commentary as a habit of avoiding responsibility. English *fate* can serve a similar softening function, as in expressions describing something as simply meant to be, yet English discourse arguably relies somewhat more readily on alternative softening strategies, such as attributing outcomes to circumstance or luck, which are lexically and conceptually distinct from *fate* and carry less of the totalising, life spanning connotation that *доля* carries in Ukrainian. This suggests that the rendition of *доля* may sometimes require choosing among the equivalents *fate*, *destiny*, *luck* or *circumstance* depending on which component of the Ukrainian meaning of the word the context foregrounds, a decision that a linguist working only from a bilingual dictionary entry is poorly equipped to make.

¹⁸ Головенко К. В. Концепти «ДОЛЯ», «ВОЛЯ», «СЕРЦЕ» в українській мовній картині світу та їх віддзеркалення в англomовному світосприйнятті. *Вісник Житомирського державного університету імені Івана Франка*, 2007. № 33. С. 191.

Дім, домівка and home

The Ukrainian words *дім*, *домівка* and the English word *home* reveal a core meaning denoting a place of residence and personal habitation. Dictionary definitions in both languages establish this spatial and social baseline (cf. “приміщення, в якому живуть люди; житло”¹⁹, “жиле приміщення осовно до того, хто в ньому живе”²⁰, “the house, apartment, etc. where you live, especially with your family”²¹). At the level of basic semantic analysis, both the English and Ukrainian words refer to a place that plays a central role in a person’s everyday life. However, corpus and phraseological data reveal a significant divergence in the structure of the surrounding semantic field. This complexity cannot be fully captured by a simple comparison in a bilingual dictionary. Whilst the English language encompasses the entire physical, legal and emotional spectrum within a single lexeme ‘home’, the Ukrainian language distributes this semantic space predominantly between two separate lexemes.

Ukrainian phraseology clearly delineates the physical entity from the emotional sanctuary. The word *дім* primarily denotes a physical structure or a household, participating in collocations that highlight construction, ownership, or the literal presence of people (“будувати дім”, “залишити дім”, “повернутися додому”). In contrast, *домівка* functions as a highly charged affective center. Ukrainian speakers treat *домівка* as a place of emotional comfort, memory, and belonging, which collocates with adjectives of warmth and origin (“рідна домівка”, “затишна домівка”, “покинута домівка”). This lexical distribution reflects a linguistic worldview that separates the material dwelling from the emotional shelter, a pattern well documented in Ukrainian ethnolinguistic research.

English *home* functions in a comparatively broader phraseological spectrum, fusing physical, institutional, and deeply emotional aspects. The lexeme collocates with verbs and nouns of profound emotional attachment (“to feel at home”, “home is where the heart is”) just as readily as it does with financial and legal institutionalization (“home ownership”, “home loan”, “property market”). This difference supports the application of conceptual metaphor theory²². English relies on the metaphorical model HOME AS AN EXTENSION OF SELF, where personal identity, legal status, and emotional security are inextricably

¹⁹ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D0%B4%D1%96%D0%BC>

²⁰ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC%D1%96%D0%B2%D0%BA%D0%B0>

²¹ Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/home>

²² Kövecses Z. Metaphor and Emotion. Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling. Cambridge University Press, 2003. P. 2.

linked. Ukrainian, conversely, maintains a strict conceptual boundary between the metaphor of ДІМ ЯК ФІЗИЧНА ОБОЛОНКА (home as a physical shell) and ДОМІВКА ЯК ДУХОВНИЙ ОСЕРЕДОК (home as a spiritual core).

A further point of divergence in the actualization of this cultural dominant concerns its communal and national dimensions. In Ukrainian, the lexeme *домівка* can easily be extended to refer to groups of people, utilizing its affective semantics to conceptualize national identity in terms of family-like intimacy, thereby framing the nation as the *домівка* of its people. The English concept of *home* undergoes a similar macro-extension, but it typically requires morphological compounding, as in the word *homeland*, to make this macro-reference explicit. Consequently, the comparative analysis of these lexemes demonstrates a distinct systemic asymmetry. The English linguistic worldview relies on structural modification to express the national dimension of the concept, whereas the Ukrainian paradigm differentiates these aspects pragmatically, contrasting the referential precision of *дім* with the deeply affectionate semantic core of *домівка* based on the specific cultural context.

Родина and family

The Ukrainian word *родина* and the English word *family* possess a common core meaning denoting a group of individuals affiliated by consanguinity or affinity (cf. “група людей, що складається з чоловіка, жінки, дітей та інших близьких родичів, які живуть разом; сім’я”²³, “a group of people who are related to each other, such as a mother, a father, and their children”²⁴). At the denotative level, both lexicographic sources define the fundamental unit of social organization. However, much like the previously analyzed concepts, these words diverge significantly in the boundaries of the category and their evaluative weight.

Corpus and phraseological data demonstrate that Ukrainian *родина* in both traditional and contemporary discourse inherently encompasses an extended kinship network. It carries profound communal and moral obligations, which is reflected in set phraseology such as “родинне вогнище” (the family hearth) or “родинне коло” (the family circle). These collocations represent *родина* as a continuous source of moral upbringing, intergenerational connection, and spiritual warmth. In the Ukrainian linguistic worldview, the concept is highly emotionally charged and rarely functions as a mere demographic descriptor, acting instead as the foundational paradigm of cultural and social cohesion.

²³ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0>

²⁴ Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/family>

On the contrary, the English lexeme *family*, even though it has a potential of extending into wider circles of kinship, is predominantly used in its nuclear meaning. Besides, it is widely used in various institutional, administrative, and juridical contexts, where the meaning is much more narrowed and individualized. Such collocations as “family law”, “family court”, “family planning” highlight a situation when the word has a predominantly technical or juridical, rather than emotional, function. It corresponds to a conceptual difference in which the English language makes use of the concept of family as an individual socio-legal unit, while Ukrainian sees *родина* as an indivisible moral chain of kinship.

Such a difference in conceptual grounding bears significant implications for public discourse. In Ukrainian civic communication, the notion of *родина* is used as an ideological unifier on many occasions when the country is described as a big family united by ties of responsibility to one another. The above practice reflects very well the collective orientation which characterizes Ukrainian cultural dominants. However, in English political discourse, the above concept can be used rhetorically too, especially when addressing such topics as family values in conservative discourse. Nevertheless, its use in the above context usually indicates a certain ideological stance adopted in a political battle ground rather than the above unifying ideological frame.

Воля and freedom

The Ukrainian word *воля* and the English word *freedom* are characterized by the meaning denoting the state of not being imprisoned, enslaved, or under external control (cf. “свобода, незалежність; протилежне неволя, рабство”²⁵, “the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited”²⁶). At the basic denotative level, both lexicographic sources establish a baseline of autonomy. However, the pair *воля* and *freedom* illustrates how historical experience shapes the semantic load of a cultural dominant perhaps more sharply than any of the previously analyzed pairs.

Corpus and phraseological evidence demonstrate that Ukrainian *воля* carries a specific historical salience tied to the collective memory of serfdom, foreign domination, and the Cossack tradition of self-governance. Consequently, *воля* frequently implies freedom won, reclaimed, or fought for, rather than a default existential condition. In contemporary civic and political discourse, *воля* is regularly paired with vocabulary of resistance, sacrifice, and national survival

²⁵ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8F>

²⁶ Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/freedom>

(“виборювати волю”, “здобути волю”). It is deeply embedded in a historical discourse, transforming it from a neutral descriptive term into a value-laden, emotionally resonant rallying concept centered on collective liberation and continuity with earlier generations.

In contrast, the English lexeme *freedom*, which undeniably has the potential to be historically or politically loaded in contexts of civil liberties, does not have the presupposition of previous captivity that is implicit in the meaning of freedom. It easily denotes an ordinary situation that is simply accepted, entering into collocations like “freedom of choice” or “freedom of speech” without any necessary connotations of survival through suffering. English freedom operates essentially in the context of personal freedoms as enshrined in constitutions or laws.

A further critical nuance lies in the lexical distribution within Ukrainian itself, as *воля* does not cover the English semantic field alone. The lexeme *свобода* exists alongside it, carrying a somewhat more abstract, legalistic, and individual-rights-oriented sense that is much closer to dominant English usage. The coexistence of the emotionally and historically charged *воля* and the legally oriented *свобода* forces translators to make precise contextual choices when rendering the English freedom. This reinforces the broader observation made in relation to *дім* and *домівка*: lexical distribution mismatches, where English fuses the historical-emotional and the abstract-legal into a single concept, constitute a fundamental axis along which cultural dominants diverge.

Душа and soul

Both Ukrainian term *душа* and English term *soul* refer to the common concept which is defined by means of denotation as something which is not material, spiritual or emotional side of a human being (cf. “внутрішній, психічний світ людини з її настроями, переживаннями та почуттями”²⁷, “the spiritual part of a person that some people believe continues to exist in some form after their body has died”²⁸). At the denotative baseline, both lexicographic sources identify this concept as the non-physical core of human existence. However, this fifth illustrative pair demonstrates that the axes of conceptual divergence identified above recur across entirely different semantic domains, exhibiting a profound cross-linguistic asymmetry in lexical distribution.

Corpus and phraseological evidence reveal that Ukrainian *душа* extends with remarkable freedom into everyday emotional and evaluative vocabulary. It acts as the primary, ubiquitous seat of emotional sincerity, moral character,

²⁷ Словник української мови в 11 томах. URL: <https://slovnyk.ua/index.php?swrd=%D0%B4%D1%83%D1%88%D0%B0>

²⁸ Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/soul>

and psychological openness. Ukrainian discourse is saturated with collocations describing a person as having a “широка душа” (a broad soul) or an “відкрита душа” (an open soul), or doing something “від усеї душі” (from the whole soul). In the Ukrainian linguistic worldview, the soul is not a distant theological abstraction but an accessible, highly active participant in daily human interaction, serving as a constant reference point for empathy and moral evaluation.

In contrast, the English lexeme *soul* retains a significantly more restricted semantic distribution, firmly anchored in an explicitly religious, philosophical, or artistic register. While English possesses collocations emphasizing spiritual depth, the word appears comparatively rarely in casual, everyday speech to describe ordinary emotional sincerity or immediate psychological states. Instead, this everyday emotional and evaluative function in English is overwhelmingly fulfilled by the lexeme *heart*. Expressions of sincerity or moral openness in English rely on phrases like “open-hearted” or doing something “from the bottom of my heart,” demonstrating a clear conceptual compartmentalization between the spiritual entity (*soul*) and the emotional center (*heart*).

This reveals a distributional pattern similar in structure, though opposite in direction, to the *дiм* and *домiвка* versus home paradigm discussed above. The English combination of *soul* and *heart* is required to cover the precise semantic territory that Ukrainian concentrates within the single, highly frequent, and stylistically flexible word *душа*. Consequently, a structural challenge arises in translation: rendering the Ukrainian *душа* into English frequently necessitates a shift to *heart* in order to preserve the pragmatic and emotional weight of the original discourse. A literal translation using *soul* would often artificially elevate the register, imposing an unintended theological or poetic nuance onto everyday conversational contexts.

3. Discourse dynamics and the reshaping of cultural dominants over time

The cultural dominants are not set in stone in the vocabulary of the languages under study. Their semantic structure is constantly strengthened, enlarged, or questioned in the process of discourse, especially in the process of political rhetoric, media communication, and now more importantly, digital communication. This chapter discusses how this process occurs in the case of the cultural dominants mentioned above and its significance for comparative lexical semantics before looking at the theoretical issues related to the interface of ethnolinguistics and cultural linguistics.

Political discourse studies have shown that when some concepts are used frequently within public communication, they receive new meaning due to the connection with certain people, events, and narratives; this phenomenon has

been observed within the framework of Ukrainian political discourse, where frequent narrative concepts develop connotations related to specific events in history. *Воля* offers a clear illustration, since its use since 2014 has become closely bound to the discourse of national resistance, which has arguably strengthened the historical bondage component of its meaning relative to earlier, more general Soviet and post-Soviet usage, when the word, though still carrying historical resonance, was less consistently and less intensively activated in daily public communication than it has been in the period since. Similarly, *родина* has been mobilised in civic and social messaging around wartime solidarity, reinforcing its communal component at the expense of any narrower nuclear sense it might otherwise carry, a shift that illustrates how a period of collective crisis can accelerate semantic reinforcement that might otherwise unfold only gradually over a much longer span of time.

The situation of English as a global language complicates comparison further, since English cultural dominants are not uniform across the varieties in which the language is used. Research on World Englishes from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective demonstrates that concepts such as *freedom* or *home* carry different conceptualisations depending on the sociocultural context of the English variety in question²⁹, so that any comparison with Ukrainian must specify which variety of English, most often standard British or American usage in the sources cited here, serves as the point of reference. This variety sensitive character of English cultural dominants means that comparative studies risk overgeneralisation if they treat English as a single undifferentiated system, a risk this chapter has attempted to mitigate by focusing consistently on standard British and American usage while acknowledging that a fuller account would need to extend the comparison to other major varieties of English used across different national and cultural contexts.

A related theoretical debate concerns the relationship between ethnolinguistics and cultural linguistics as research programmes, since both claim to describe how culture shapes lexical meaning yet differ in their preferred units of analysis and evidentiary standards, ethnolinguistics tending toward close reading of a smaller set of key lexemes and cultural linguistics tending toward broader corpus based demonstration of shared cognitive schemas³⁰. The present research draws on both traditions deliberately, using close lexicographic and phraseological analysis alongside broader discourse evidence, on the grounds that the two methods answer complementary questions rather than competing ones. Close reading identifies which lexemes are candidates for cultural dominant status, while

²⁹ Wolf H.-G., Polzenhagen F. *World Englishes: A Cognitive Sociolinguistic Approach*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009. pp. 1–25.

³⁰ Underhill J. W. *Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. P. 15.

discourse-based evidence tracks how their meaning shifts over time and across genres. Neither method alone would have sufficed for the analysis presented in the previous section, since close reading without discourse evidence risks mistaking a synchronic snapshot for a stable, timeless meaning, while discourse evidence without close lexicographic grounding risks losing sight of the precise semantic components that discourse is in fact reshaping.

Online and social media communication adds another level of complexity that is not adequately captured by previous research conducted on traditional forms of media communication. This is due to the fact that with the current rapid rate and huge amount of online communication, the evaluative load of a cultural dominant may change within a few months as opposed to years owing to particular ways of usage. While undertaking a systematic corpus analysis of this digital phenomenon may exceed the boundaries of the present chapter, it is safe to assume that given the previously mentioned discourse devices, words like *воля* and *родина* are likely to acquire new contextual connotations at a rate which is difficult for conventional print-based lexicology to follow up with. This is an issue which should be directly confronted in future comparative research within this field.

Finally, the collection of cultural keywords across languages and their discourse behaviour, as advanced in recent comparative volumes bringing together case studies from multiple language communities, supports treating the Ukrainian English pair examined here as one instance of a more general phenomenon rather than an isolated case, which strengthens the methodological argument for extending the procedure developed in this chapter to other language pairs. Such comparative collections demonstrate that the specific axes of divergence identified above for Ukrainian and English, namely differing in metaphorical source domains, lexical distribution of a single foreign concept, and historical resonance attached to an otherwise shared core meaning, recur, in varying combinations, across many other language pairs studied in the broader cultural keywords literature, which suggests that these axes may constitute a genuinely general typology of ways in which cultural dominants diverge across languages rather than a set of observations specific to the Ukrainian English case alone.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has argued that lexical items functioning as cultural dominants, exemplified by *доля* and *fate*, *дім*, *домівка* and *home*, *родина* and *family*, *воля* and *freedom*, *душа* and *soul*, encode meaning that exceeds what bilingual dictionary equivalence presents. Ethnolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and the Natural Semantic Metalanguage programme provide the

methodological tools needed to analyse these culturally grounded concepts rigorously rather than leaving their interpretation to the intuition of native speakers. The comparative analysis has shown that Ukrainian and English cultural dominants diverge along at least three distinct axes: differences in the metaphorical source domain used to structure an abstract concept, as observed for *доля* and *fate*, differences in how a single foreign concept is distributed across multiple native lexemes, as in *дім*, *домівка* and *home* and again, in reverse direction, for *душа* relative to *soul* and *heart*, and differences produced by distinct historical experience that attaches additional connotations to an otherwise shared core meaning, as observed most sharply for *воля* and *freedom*. Discourse analysis allows us to state that these dominants are not static, since political and social communication constantly reinforces, narrows or broadens their semantic scope and this process has been particularly evident in Ukrainian public discourse since 2014.

These findings have practical implications for translation, as an awareness of the specific axis of divergence empowers the translator to select compensation strategies that correspond to a particular type of discrepancy, rather than applying a single, universal solution to all words laden with cultural meaning. A translator facing *доля* benefits from recognising a metaphorical source domain mismatch and may need to add explanatory context or choose among several possible English equivalents depending on which component the source text foregrounds, while a translator facing *дім* or *домівка* benefits instead from recognising a lexical distribution mismatch and choosing between the two Ukrainian words, or supplementing the English lexeme *home* with additional modifiers, depending on whether the referential or the affective component predominates in context.

These findings also carry significance for intercultural communication training, where learners benefit more from understanding the value structure behind a word than from memorising its nearest dictionary equivalent, and for lexicography, where the analysis suggests that dictionaries aimed at learners and translators would gain from marking cultural dominants explicitly and noting their typical axis of cross linguistic divergence rather than treating them as ordinary vocabulary items indistinguishable from technical or purely referential terms.

The procedure employed here ranging from theoretical definition through lexicographical and phraseological analysis to discourse-based verification, appears to be applicable to other language pairs and other cultural dominants, in addition to those considered in this chapter. Further research could usefully expand the list of dominants under investigation, incorporate a systematic corpus-based quantitative assessment of collocation patterns rather than relying predominantly on illustrative examples, to investigate the aforementioned

acceleration of semantic reformation, which is characteristic specifically of digital and social media, and to test the proposed procedure on typologically more distant language pairs, where the axes of divergence identified here may prove either to be confirmed or to require revision and expansion.

SUMMARY

The current chapter explores the ways in which lexical semantics reveals cultural dominants in Ukrainian and English and the way they vary when being compared. The issue under study relies on the fact that the cultural dominants *fate*, *home*, *freedom*, *family*, etc. imply meanings that go beyond their dictionary entries and thus lead to misunderstandings. The discussion relies on the concepts and theories of ethnolinguistics, cognitive linguistics and cultural linguistics applied to formulate an operational definition of a cultural dominant as a lexeme whose meaning is determined by the value system, history and daily activities of a language community. Examples of some dominants from the Ukrainian and English language data are examined on the basis of their dictionary definitions, collocations, phrasemes and discourse usage. The findings prove that the Ukrainian dominants *доля* and *воля* have the connotations of fatalism and group identity, which cannot be fully conveyed by the English *fate* and *freedom*. In addition, the English concept of *home* is associated with personalisation and the notion of property which in the Ukrainian language is distributed between the separate dominants *дім* and *домівка*. The study shows how political and media discourse transforms the semantic content of these concepts over the course of time on the example of the Ukrainian post-independence discourse. It turns out that the lexical semantic comparison of cultural dominants is the more reliable foundation for translation and intercultural training compared to the simple lexical replacement. As the prospect for the further study, the procedure of identification and description of cultural dominants is suggested for other language pairs.

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