

## **ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ СОЦІОКУЛЬТУРНИХ ЗНАКІВ ЯК ВІДОБРАЖЕННЯ ЗМІН В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ СУСПІЛЬСТВІ**

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*У дослідженні здійснено спробу семіотичного аналізу соціокультурних знаків у сучасній Україні, виявлення їх трансформацій, з'ясування культуротвірної функції соціокультурних знаків, встановлення їх ролі у розумінні сутності процесів, що відбуваються в соціокультурній сфері, та їх впливу на духовну складову. Соціокультурні знаки розглядаються як маркери змін у соціокультурному просторі.*

*Ключові слова: семіотичний аналіз, соціокультурні знаки, трансформації, бінарна опозиція, конотативне значення*

## **THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNS AS REFLECTION OF CHANGES IN UKRAINIAN SOCIETY**

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*This article is an attempt at a semiotic analysis of socio-cultural signs in Ukraine, demonstrating their transformations, determining the culture formative function of socio-cultural signs, clarifying their role in understanding the processes in the socio-cultural sphere and their influence on the spiritual constituent. Socio-cultural signs are considered as markers in the socio-cultural space.*

*Keywords: semiotic analysis, socio-cultural signs, transformations, binary opposition, connotative meaning.*

Ukraine is going through a period of rapid economic, political and socio-cultural changes. The consequences of these changes and their influence on the system of values and culture in general are often implicit, unapparent and inconceivable. The semiotic methodology may help shed some light on these issues.

A semiotic approach presupposes a consideration of Ukrainian culture as a sign system (Eco 1976). These are signs that together combine to make a unique repository of 'the semiotic memory of a culture' (Лотман 2000). Their repertoire is various and diverse in different cultures and depends on many factors (historical development, geographical location, relationships with other cultures, influence of tradition and mentality etc.). According to the classification of signs developed by Charles Peirce, the founder of semiotics, there are three main kinds of signs: iconic signs, indexes and conventional signs (Peirce 1985).

Socio-cultural signs are of a conventional nature (the relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional, i.e. established conditionally). An individual lives in the world of signs, which mediate his/her relationships with

the world. He/she acquires the system of signs shared by other members of the community or nation during the processes of socialization and acculturation (Лотман 2000). An individual can join social and cultural events and phenomena by carrying out some sign procedures. It is often emphasized by semioticians that the signs regulate an individual's behaviour.

At the current stage of development in Ukrainian society there is an evident need to fulfill the profound analysis of signs existing in its semiosphere in order to elucidate the influence of institutional changes on Ukrainian society in general. Besides, it would also let us forecast and prevent undesirable consequences of the importation of foreign formal and informal institutions into Ukraine.

According to the institutional theory, property is the basic instrument of economy. But a change in the form of property not only impacts on the economy, but on the society as a whole, thus recoding reality in a new way and even penetrating into the underlying structures of consciousness. Ukrainians have become witnesses to such changes after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the transfer from a collective form of property to a private one. So, it seems necessary to outline the main transformations within the scope of socio-cultural signs that are the result of such changes.

Cultural signs as well as other ones have become the object of analyses in the works of many researches (representatives of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics Yu. Lotman, B. Uspensky, V. Ivanov, as well as R. Jakobson, U. Eco, R. Barthes, Yu. Kristeva, R. Scholes, J. Culler and others) (Лотман 2000; Барт 1975; Eco 1976).

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to outline and analyze the main transformations within the scope of socio-cultural signs in modern Ukraine.

One of the main changes in the semiotic space of Ukraine's culture is displacement within the binary opposition 'WE' – 'I'. In the Soviet period the main sign of the epoch was 'WE'. It reflected the collectivist orientation of the society and had a positive connotative meaning of joint effort when carrying out important tasks, achieving high social goals etc.

After Ukraine proclaimed its independence and made the transit to a market economy (with private property) western individualism was imported into our country. Thus, nowadays the prevalent pronoun (especially among the young generation of Ukrainians, who are more open to change) is 'I'. This now has the connotative meaning of opposing oneself to the others, emphasizing one's self-sufficiency, exceptionalism and the right to lead one's life according to one's preferences. A well-known expression of the Soviet period "*Я – последняя буква в алфавите*" ('I is the last letter in the alphabet') is hardly ever used nowadays, because it has lost its connotative meaning of blaming a superiority of individual interests over collective ones.

Another sign transformation is reflected in the opposition 'ALTRUISM' – 'EGOISM'. The latter is seen as the prevalent one. Nowadays 'giving the last shirt' („*віддавання останньої сорочки*") is considered to be a sign of a non-enterprising character, which is the same as being a loser. Along with this an

individual's striving for self-enrichment and self-gratification is encouraged. This trend is demonstrated by the appearance of fashionable and trendy clothes shops under the signs 'EGOIST', 'ALTER-EGO', 'EGOMANIA' etc. Thus, the sign 'EGOISM' has changed its polarity from a negative to a positive one, and acquired the connotative meaning of success and financial security.

The main problem, in our opinion, is that the 'I' used to be controlled and restricted by the activity of the 'WE', but nowadays the 'WE' has lost its influence. Consequently the activity of the 'I' is not restricted and controlled anymore and this often leads to the absurd. There are many examples of such behaviour: businessmen who neglect all ethical principles for business purposes and monetary gain, deputies at different levels forcing citizens to give bribes etc.

Displacement in the dichotomy of signs 'WE' – 'I' lead to a transformation of the signs 'COLLECTIVE' – 'INDIVIDUAL'. The connotative meaning of the sign 'COLLECTIVE' changed from 'denoting the common business, directed at reaching high moral values, approved by all the members of the community' to 'signifying something that oppresses personality, deprives an individual of opportunity to expose his/her capabilities, talents, and leads to unification of all the members of the community'. At the same time, the meaning of the sign 'INDIVIDUAL' was elevated from 'something that has no high aim' to 'the main human value'.

Thus, shifts in the binary opposition of the signs 'WE' – 'I', 'OUR' – 'MY', 'COLLECTIVE' – 'INDIVIDUAL' become apparent in the change of their connotative meanings. However, it should be noted that the signs 'I' and 'MY' didn't acquire an absolute meaning like the English 'I', which is even written with a capital letter. Besides, markers of collective orientation are still represented in the Ukrainian and Russian language systems, where the sign "я" ('I') is written with a small letter, but "Бу" ('you') is often written with a capital letter.

This shift can be partially explained by the centuries of hardship and the experience of having to fight for survival, thanks to collective, joint efforts (for instance, during World War II, famine, the periods after the war, the realization of grandiose projects, such as the Baykal-Amur Railroad construction etc.) which have been deeply rooted into the subconsciousness of the Ukrainian people. That is why in some spheres of socio-cultural life the process of changing the emphasis in the dichotomy of the signs 'I' – 'WE' is very slow. This can be observed in the modern education system, where the influence of the sign 'WE' still persists and can be felt during classes in the form of 'cribbing or cheating', 'prompting and hinting' as a sign of mutual assistance, that is often misperceived by many American and European teachers. That is why the reformation of the Ukrainian education system and attempts to model it on the European one (e.g. joining the Bologna process) should be carried out gradually, taking into account the necessity of an adaptation to the Ukrainian mentality.

It should be noted that the sign 'LIFE' underwent several transformations as well. Ukrainians changed their attitude to life. They used to have a more philosophical attitude to it, searching for the answers to the questions "What do I

live for?”, “What’s the sense of my life?”. Nowadays the attitude is more pragmatic and the more relevant question is “How can I live?”. In other words emphasis shifted from the perception of life as a mystery, which is worth trying to comprehend and understand, to the perception of it as a problem that needs to be solved. Thus a philosophical attitude is replaced by the consumption interests.

The sign ‘TIME’ has acquired some connotative meanings as well. It used to be more future oriented. The ideologists of the Soviet government emphasized that although ‘life in the present time’ is full of hardships, people should work hard and believe that ‘the future will be much better’ („світле майбутнє нпуйде” – ‘radiant future’ will come). Thus the sign ‘TIME’ had an optimistic connotative meaning, because people saw ‘the light at the end of the tunnel’. This attitude to time and life has changed. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Ukrainians don’t want ‘to work hard today in order to be happy tomorrow’. They have become mostly ‘present-time oriented’, they want to be happy ‘now and here’ (not at some time in the future). Besides, time is perceived by Ukrainians as a very fleeting substance, that is why there is no time to be lost.

However, this has also led to a change in the polarity of the sign ‘LABOUR’. Perhaps due to the reasons mentioned above and the collectivist orientation, labour was highly valued in the Soviet period. Its connotations were completely positive and meant ‘making a good contribution to the social life of the community’. Nowadays this sign has partially changed its polarity: for many young Ukrainians it has become desirable to become rich, however with minimal effort. Thus, change of the sign’s polarity led to unfortunate results (rise of the level of juvenile delinquency and prostitution etc.).

There has been a change in the worldview of Ukrainians. The sign ‘SPACE’ has broadened its boundaries. Instead of seeing themselves within the borders of the USSR and mainly opposed to other countries, now they realize they belong to a global world and even an entire universe. Instead of opposition and confrontation there is cooperation.

Other significant changes happened in the binary opposition ‘TOP’ – ‘BOTTOM’. “Робітники та колгоспники” (‘workers and collective farmers’) were classed in the category ‘TOP’ in the Soviet period. Nowadays, after the change of property form they are classed as “BOTTOM’, i.e. to mention that a person comes from a working class family or the family of a collective farmer’ or is ‘a typical representative of the working class’ is inappropriate and sometimes even impolite. This is due to the fact that the signs ‘WORKER’ and ‘COLLECTIVE FARMER’ have acquired negative shades of meaning and have connotations of low social and financial positions. Representatives of the intelligentsia (“інтелігенція”) moved to the category bottom, too. On the other hand, the category ‘TOP’ is occupied by oligarchs, successful businessmen and people from the government.

In the XXI century boundaries between ‘RIGHT’ and ‘WRONG’ are blurred. The role of morality has diminished. In the Soviet epoch ‘other people’s opinions’ were very important, and the behaviour of every individual was

corrected and modified according to this. Today 'SELF-EXPRESSION' has become a popular socio-cultural sign.

'HOMOGENEITY' and 'UNIFORMITY' in Ukrainian culture have been replaced by 'DIVERSITY' and 'PLURALITY'. The former signs have acquired negative connotative meanings: 'something that restricts self-expression'.

To conclude, the influence of institutional changes on Ukrainian culture is significant. The analysis of signs reveals implicit transformations in the system of values as well as in the nation's consciousness. Socio-cultural signs should be carefully studied and analyzed in order to protect Ukrainian culture from undesirable consequences and transformations.

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