

Artículo de investigación

Semantic neutralization of current socio-political terms as a factor of psychological adaptation in present-day communicative conditions

Нивелирование семантики актуальных социально-политических терминов как фактор психологической адаптации личности в современных коммуникативных условиях

Neutralización semántica de los términos sociopolíticos actuales como factor de adaptación psicológica en las condiciones comunicativas actuales

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Written by:

Olga Vasilyevna Shatalova²¹²

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1656-0443>

E-Library ID: 806383

Tatiana Yuryevna Pavelieva²¹³

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6859-1554>

E-Library ID: 828890

Abstract

The study investigates the attributes of functional transformation occurring in the semantics of some notions that are characteristic of the current socio-political environment, including: “war”, “a militant”, “an extremist”, “a terrorist”, “a suicide attacker”, “a separatist”, “a rebel fighter”, “an air strike”, “a peacekeeper”, “a refugee / refugees”, and “cyber warfare”. The experiment carried out within the framework of the study aimed to discover the peculiarities of perceiving the aforementioned notions by individuals a given community. Based on the results of several conclusions regarding the semantic transformation of the concepts in the present-day communicative environment were made. The article describes the qualitative and quantitative results of the testing undertaken during the experiment – the testing indicates that Russian language speakers subconsciously tend to neutralize negative connotations, which is conditioned by various socio-psychological factors and the etymology of socio-political terms.

Keywords: Semantics, linguistic persona, communicative environment, mass media, the Internet, psychological adaptation.

Аннотация

В исследовании исследуются признаки функциональной трансформации, возникающие в семантике некоторых понятий, характерных для текущей социально-политической среды, в том числе: «война», «воинствующий», «экстремистский», «террорист», «самоубийство», «злоумышленник», «сепаратист», «бунтовщик», «воздушный удар», «миротворец», «беженец / беженцы» и «кибервойна». Эксперимент, проведенный в рамках исследования, направлен на выявление особенностей восприятия вышеупомянутых представлений индивидами в данной общности. По результатам ряда выводов относительно смысловой трансформации понятий в современной коммуникативной среде были сделаны. В статье описываются качественные и количественные результаты тестирования, проведенного в ходе эксперимента - тестирование показывает, что носители русского языка подсознательно склонны нейтрализовать негативные коннотации, что обусловлено различными социально-психологическими факторами и этимологией социально-политических терминов.

Ключевые слова: семантика, языковая личность, коммуникативная среда, СМИ, Интернет, психологическая адаптация.

²¹² PhD in Linguistics, Professor of the Institute of Philology at Lipetsk State Pedagogical P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky University 398024, 42, Lenin St., Lipetsk, Russian Federation.

²¹³ PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, Professor of the Institute of Philology at Lipetsk State Pedagogical P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky University 398024, 42, Lenin St., Lipetsk, Russian Federation.

Resumen

El estudio investiga los atributos de la transformación funcional que ocurre en la semántica de algunas nociones que son características del entorno sociopolítico actual, que incluyen: "guerra", "un militante", "un extremista", "un terrorista", "un suicidio atacante", "un separatista", "un luchador rebelde", "un ataque aéreo", "un pacificador", "un refugiado / refugiado" y "guerra cibernética". El experimento llevado a cabo en el marco del estudio tuvo como objetivo descubrir las peculiaridades de percibir las nociones mencionadas por los individuos de una comunidad determinada. Con base en los resultados de varias conclusiones con respecto a la transformación semántica de los conceptos en el entorno comunicativo actual. El artículo describe los resultados cualitativos y cuantitativos de las pruebas realizadas durante el experimento: las pruebas indican que los hablantes de ruso tienden a neutralizar inconscientemente las connotaciones negativas, que están condicionadas por varios factores sociopsicológicos y la etimología de los términos sociopolíticos.

Palabras clave: Semántica, personalidad lingüística, entorno comunicativo, medios de comunicación, Internet, adaptación psicológica.

Introduction

The problems of the interaction between language and thought are raised in a number of conceptual areas of linguistic research and interdisciplinary studies. One such area is the theory of the linguistic persona, which focuses on the issues relating to the development and existence of an individual in the given social, political, ethical, and aesthetic conditions. The condition of modern man affected by globalization and the modernization of his psychological and social environment is determined by a variety of factors. Present-day anthropocentric studies recognize the decisive role of the linguistic component of the communicative environment in the individual's development and existence as axiomatic.

The theory of the linguistic persona enables one to study the structure of a linguistic persona, to determine relationship between an individual and their linguistic environment, to designate the fundamental aspects of the development of the communicative environment and to harmonize the existence of an individual within a particular community and social reality in general.

The verbal-semantic or "zero" level in the structure of a linguistic persona (Karaulov, 2017) has been a popular subject for research in the last few decades. This has resulted in describing a number of nuclear and peripheral lexemes in the structure of a linguistic persona, analyzing the stated lexemes statistically and pragmatically, and classifying the units of the zero level of the linguistic persona. Yet, the issue of semantic changes stipulated by individual perception of lexical items remains open both on the synchronic and diachronic levels.

The need to explore the semantics of current socio-political terminology as a phenomenon of the present-day communicative environment is conditioned by numerous factors, including the impact of the informational environment on the individual's emotional and psychological state along with the development and intensification of the aggressiveness of the communicative environment. This study leaves out the factual content of the information circulating in the communicative environment and instead focuses on investigating aspects of language that can affect the individual's perception of reality, both on a personal level and on the level of interaction with real life events, by forming associative-verbal areas in his or her consciousness.

The content of the associative-verbal area is shaped by conceptually significant lexemes and prioritized notions and terms regularly used by the mass media and on the Internet. These lexemes may be perceived and used by native speakers according to their original meanings as listed in dictionaries or used in everyday communication among native speakers. On the other hand, current social and political notions may be incorporated in the meaning which is associatively formed in the individual's consciousness under the influence of certain linguistic or extralinguistic factors. This process can be designated as the semantic transformation of a verbally fixed concept. The study of the stated process is related to the necessity to control expressive factors of objective reality and to coordinate the impact of negative aspects on the emotional and psychological state of the individual and society in general. This aspect of the research is correlated with such branches of

the humanities as psycholinguistics, social rhetoric, communicative pragmatics, and so on.

Though Western linguistics does not use the term “linguistic persona”, numerous studies are dedicated to investigating the correlation between language and the individual’s social rank (Milroy and Gordon, 2003), gender (Coates, 2004), age (Chambers, 2003; Coupland et al., 2001; Mendoza, 2002), and ethnicity (Fought, 2006). These British researchers experimentally confirmed that a higher social rank determines a higher level of language skills that gender influences the social roles of the interlocutors, and that phonological and structural speech properties are correlated with ethnically conditioned perception of language facts. The results of these studies play a significant role in determining the criteria for selecting the study group for our experiment, as they allow us to use data which do not require further corroboration.

Nevertheless, the hypothesis about the grammatico-semantic perception of linguistic phenomena being a revealing factor of an individual’s development (Shatalova, 2012; Shatalova, 2017) along with the impact of the semantic transformation of linguistically fixed concepts on the individual and his or her perception of objective reality remains unexplored. It should be noted that an individual in this study is interpreted as a person considered separately from their community society and as a generalized category reflecting the properties and peculiarities of a certain community society.

It is possible to assume that the semantic aspect of studying the linguistic persona has been largely ignored by Western linguistics either because of its focus on interdisciplinary research embracing the connection of linguistics proper with psychology, sociology, anthropology and so on, or because of the structural peculiarities of Western European languages and the nominative content of their lexical items. However, for the Russian language and the shaping of the Russian-speaking environment as a fairly wide space in intra- and international communication the questions of semantic content and semantic transformation prove to be essential.

On the basis of observations concerning the influence of the inner (grammatical) nature of the utterance on the perception of a certain phenomenon by an individual and society, the following hypothesis was formulated. The semantic transformation of a concept also affects the perception by an individual and society in general of a phenomenon denoted by a specific

word. Expanding the scope of research, it is possible to trace the formation of social ideas, stereotypes, and moral assessments which are determined by the fact that there is a change in the perception/understanding of the semantics of concepts that are symbolic for a certain historical and social period. The stated transformation of the semantic content of concepts / terms may be due to the psychological need of an individual to adapt to the new circumstances of reality which do not always reflect humanistic intentions in the development of society and correspond to a harmonious perception of reality by the individual and society.

The process of neutralizing semantics may help tone down aggressive aspects of certain phenomena. The suggested hypothesis at the initial stage was based both on practical observations of the authors of this research and on lexicographical data – for example, the dynamic “Dictionary of the Russian language of the late XX century” by G.N. Sklyarevskaya (1998). To exemplify the idea of semantic transformation, let us consider the word “ambitious”, which, as a personal characteristic in the standard Russian language of the 20th c., implied such qualities as unhealthy vanity, arrogance, self-importance, snobbery. Naturally, “ambitious” was perceived negatively since the professional and personal realization of the individual possessing such characteristics was incompatible with the socially accepted ethics of Socialism. In the late 20th c., with the change of social priorities and norms determining the relationship between the individual and society, the notion “ambitious” acquires a positive connotation as its semantics now gravitates to such qualities as purposefulness, pursuit of self-fulfillment and self-realization. This and numerous other examples testify to the fact that the neutralization of the negative connotation of certain concepts influences not only the native speaker’s perception of particular phenomena but of objective reality on the whole, since the individual adapts to new – competitive – circumstances of self-realization.

Materials and methods

The experimental study is based on the idea of analyzing the evaluative perception of social and political terms and checking their integration into the structure of the linguistic persona of a native speaker of Russian. The major research method employed in the study was the heuristic/active (experimental) method: as a stimulus for language input, the participants were offered lexemes selected by means of the continuous

sampling method by employees of the university research laboratory “Linguistic Persona: Sociology and Psychology of Communication” and students participating in the work of the laboratory. The list of lexemes included the following items: war, a militant, an extremist, a terrorist, a suicide attacker, a separatist, a rebel fighter, an air strike, a peacekeeper, a refugee/refugees, cyber warfare.

At the first stage, the participants in the study were offered a questionnaire. The preamble to the questionnaire outlined the range of the concepts under analysis (the complete list of the aforementioned lexemes), stipulating that the questions concern all the given words as a group of items characterized by a common topic and usage in the socio-political communicative environment. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice survey questions:

1. Are these words part of the active vocabulary of a contemporary native speaker of Russian? (Yes/No/Never thought about it)
2. Does the topic of war/military action worry you personally as real-life phenomena? (Yes/No/Never thought about it)
3. How often do you use/hear/read these words in your communicative environment? (Once a day/More than once a day/Once a week)
4. Do you know the meaning of these terms? Have you ever looked into their semantics? (Yes/No/Never thought about it)

The first question aimed to find out the general perception of the problem of military action in the modern world as well as the functioning of lexemes which denote things connected with military action. The option “Never thought about it” automatically determined the respondents whose further participation in the survey was subjective and unproductive.

The second and the third questions allowed determining the level of the respondents’ social commitment and their aptitude for analyzing the pragmalinguistic environment as a sphere where the individual exists and develops. Question 4 was aimed at establishing the level of the respondents’ linguistic competence considering their professional orientation.

At the second stage of the survey (Stage II.1), based on the results of the questionnaire, the participants were divided into two groups: Group

II-a (socially active) and Group II-b (those who expressed their neutral attitude to the subject-matter of the survey). Since apart from the general objective of the research – investigating the peculiarities of semantic transformations in the vocabulary of an individual and society – there arose a necessity to establish the reasons for which socially active native speakers display a neutral attitude towards a potentially important problem (war/military action), an associative-linguistic test which reflected a potential correlation between native and borrowed words as well as possible psychological reactions was worked out in order to interpret neologisms which have become widely spread in the Russian language communicative environment. The test was based on the information about the etymology (native/borrowed) and lexical status (neutral/neologism) of the lexemes in question provided by academic explanatory dictionaries, interactive online dictionaries, thesauri, and an associative dictionary of the Russian language. The obtained data were arranged in the form of a test-table, which participants had to fill out using the punch card method, choosing one possible associative reaction for each given word.

The test-table was offered to the participants from both groups – II-a and II-b. Each group was tested separately but simultaneously in order to ensure the objectivity of the survey.

Taking into account the factor of personal socio-political and psycho-emotional orientation towards the analysis of the pragmatic impact of current social concepts on the perception of reality along with the factor of possessing linguistic analysis skills (both identified by the participants themselves), the respondents from Group II-b were asked to interpret the terms “a militant, a terrorist, an extremist, a separatist, a rebel fighter, an air strike, a peacekeeper, cyber warfare”. Each participant in the linguistic experiment was to provide an independent answer. The analysis of the obtained data allowed reducing the given answers to a certain number of standardized formulas corresponding to the most widely spread interpretations in the present-day communicative environment (Table A). Conclusions were drawn on the basis of a complex pragmasemantic analysis of the data obtained at each stage of the research.

The participants in the survey were senior students of a local university who major in the Russian language and Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpretation, and Cross-Cultural Communication. The limitations of the research

base are conditioned by specific socio-psychological characteristics of the selected study group, consistently and systematically developed in linguistics worldwide:

- 1) University students are a socially well-adjusted group gravitating to standard language usage and being more sensitive to linguistic changes than an average native speaker;
- 2) 95% of the students were female, which, according to scientific data, implies that they use language means to objectify their gender identity;
- 3) The selected group was ethnically homogeneous as it consisted of people using Russian either as their mother tongue or as the language of their socialisation, which is essential for the objectivity of the research;
- 4) The selected group was also homogeneous in terms of age as a factor of social activity (21 – 23 y.o.).

The selection of the recipient group at this stage of the research was also stipulated by such factors as possessing special linguistic knowledge, ability to carry out research, teaching practice which implies having some experience in assessing the impact of various linguistic phenomena on education and upbringing, as well as on the formation of social views in general.

Participation was offered to all the students of the Philology Department of a local university. 60% volunteered to participate (100% of them being females). 28% of those who refused to take part in the survey explained their decision by an insufficient level of skills necessary for the analysis of linguistic phenomena, while 12% stated that they did not want to express their opinion regarding social or political concepts. The research did not imply analyzing the results of the selection of the recipient group or personal characteristics of respondents who refused to take part in the survey.

To ensure the relevance of the study, the participants were asked to evaluate the semantics of words that are actively used in the modern communicative environment on all levels of communication: the official media (television, radio, Internet news sites), as well as unofficial sources – various web portals and electronic resources like social networks.

Results

The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire survey (stage I) revealed that one third of the study participants (33%) did not think about the semantics and pragmatics of the functioning of social and political terms in the modern communicative environment, thus objectifying their neutral attitude to issues related to military action.

Identifying causes of displaying a neutral attitude towards current socio-political phenomena is a multifaceted challenge that cannot be met within the framework of a linguistic study. Yet, linguistic methods allow singling out and characterizing the linguistic aspect of the problem. The psycholinguistic experiment (Stage II.1) whose results are cited in Table B reveals that virtually all the participants, irrespective of their social and professional orientation (i.e. both the recipients of Group II-a and Group II-b), being native speakers of Russian and thus subconsciously perceiving the inner semantics of the given lexemes, expressed negative associative reactions to the following phenomena: war, murderer, bombardment; to the phenomena evoking the reactions of detachment / remoteness from reality refer terrorism, terrorist, extremist, separatist, air strike, cyber warfare. At the same time, given the peculiarities of the categories of time and space in the Russian language, the emotion of “detachment” (a term suggested by the Associative Dictionary) is hard for native speakers to interpret: whether or not the stated concepts are geographically unrelated to the participants’ location or historically unrelated to the present moment is a matter of in-depth research.

It is possible to assume that the foreign origin of the lexical units terrorism, terrorist, extremist, separatist, air strike, and cyber warfare is a decisive factor in preventing native speakers of Russian from perceiving them as phenomena threatening the life, health, and well-being of an individual and society in general. The consciousness of native speakers neutralizes negative semantics conditioned by the principle of the naïve perception of reality: “I don’t understand it therefore I’m not afraid of it” (a principal difference in perceiving similar phenomena through lexemes etymologically related to various languages was formulated in traditional linguistics by A.A. Potebnya in the following way: in different individuals, different languages are related to different areas and ways of thinking (Potebnya, 1958). The assumption concerning the perception of socio-political

terms by a contemporary native speaker of Russian is indirectly confirmed by the fact that the respondents' reaction to the compound "suicide attacker" registered during the experiment was negative. This is undoubtedly determined by the influence of the native element "attacker" (Rus. *smertnik*). According to the Associative Dictionary, it evokes the emotions of fear, suffering, and compassion, which is conditioned by the typical of the Russian national mentality feeling of empathy towards those who wandered from the straight and narrow and committed a crime that entailed serious or tragic consequences for them themselves. As to the word "rebel fighter" (Rus. *opolchenets*), due to its historical associations it does not cause any negative emotions. Its maximal "remoteness" of perception (100% and 87% in the two study groups correspondingly) is explained precisely by the historical perspective.

Stage II.2, which aimed to find out individual intentions of a linguistic persona in perceiving the semantics of the concepts / terms under discussion, allows making the following observations (see Table C for the statistical data):

- 1) In defining the designated concepts, virtually all the participants employed standardized clichéd expressions which are often used synonymously in the present-day communicative environment: *terrorist/militant/member of a terrorist group/member of a terrorist organization; extremist/member or an extremist organization; air strike/military action*. It testifies to the considerable influence of the mass media on native speakers' perception of various phenomena as well as to their making such words part of native speakers' vocabulary without a conscious attempt on the part of the latter to understand their semantics. Therefore it is natural that the formation of evaluations/emotionally determined connotations in the perception of this or that phenomenon in such circumstances is impossible;
- 2) The previous thesis is corroborated by the fact that when defining the item "peacekeeper", most of the respondents (20%) resorted to the expression "Blue Helmets", which from the semantic point of view cannot be accepted as an interpretation of the notion as it is based on metaphoric transfer and is idiomatized;
- 3) Quite a number of the participants (18%) defined the notion of "rebel fighter" by correlating it with the situation involving Ukraine and the so-called Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics, thus displaying their perception of the concept as entirely influenced by the contemporary media discourse and totally lacking in personal effort to look into its core semantics or historical content. This fact also confirms the priority that the media content has over a potentially independent understanding of a lexeme/concept by a linguistic persona;
- 4) Lack of understanding of the inner semantics of the lexical items under discussion demonstrated by the participants in the experiment is also confirmed by the respondents' using contradictory notions in interpreting a concept, which can be treated as a case of oxymoron: "a peacekeeper is someone enforcing peace with the help of weapons" (34%);
- 5) A complete semantic neutralization (complete ignorance of the essence of the concept) was demonstrated by the participants in defining the concept "cyber warfare" as the suggested variants "a means of destroying social norms/a natural state of politics" (66%) determine the peculiarities of its functioning in society instead of its essence, whereas the definition "a way of fighting which can replace waging a war in which weapons are used" (34%) reflects a specific – "pronominal" way of interpretation as it states the difference between cyber war and conventional war, but does not explain the meaning of the phenomenon;
- 6) The participants in the experiment had no difficulty interpreting the notions "militant, terrorist, extremist, separatist, air strike, cyber warfare, peacekeeper", which leads one to believe that these concepts are firmly established in the structure of the linguistic persona of native Russian speakers as determined by the impact of their communicative environment;
- 7) The neutral (standardized/clichéd) perception of the events denoted by socio-political terms is to a large extent determined by the neutralization of their semantics in the communicative environment.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study may be used for developing conceptual strategies of shaping the linguistic persona of an individual and a generalized linguistic persona (a member of a community/society), as well as for further research: the obtained data may be relevant for making comparisons in investigating linguistic reception among representatives of other social groups (different in educational background, gender, age, ethnicity etc.).

At the same time, it is impossible to assert the absolute objectivity of the findings of the study, since the principle of selecting the recipient group based on possessing linguistic knowledge and assuming a priori that the participants are susceptible to semantic nuances of linguistic phenomena has not been experimentally tested. The number of the participants in the study (≈ 170 people) may also be increased, while the results may either obtain further confirmation or be refuted by an analogous study conducted among Philology students of other universities.

An additional factor justifying the relevance and debatable nature of the presented study is the impact of English-language news sites, portals, social networks which also use social and political terms “war, militant, extremist, terrorist, separatist, rebel fighter, suicide attacker, air strike, peacemaker, refugee/refugees, cyber warfare” on the linguistic persona of a young person (the participants in the study). It should also be noted that part of the notions under analysis are represented in the English language context in the transliterated form (from the point of view of a native Russian speaker): extremist (Rus. *ekstremist*), terrorist (Rus. *terrorist*), separatist (Rus. *separatist*), cyber warfare (Rus. *kibervoina*), yet their perception is influenced precisely by the English language context. Other words – air strike, peacemaker – due to the wide spread of one-root words unrelated to politics in the Russian language (for example, strike as a

bowling term, -maker – as a morpheme-like element used to build compound nouns denoting representatives of various occupations – image-maker, video maker etc.) may get semantically neutralized when perceived in the context of English-language media texts. This aspect requires further research in terms of crosslingual associations, perfecting the factors of selecting the study group, employing the sociological and pragmalinguistic data on the degree of contemporary Russians’ involvement (qualitatively and quantitatively) into a foreign language communicative space.

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Annex 1.

Table A. Characteristics of the socio-political involvement of the study group and their degree of awareness of the semantics of current political terminology (based on the results of the questionnaire – Stage I).

Are these words part of the active vocabulary of a contemporary native speaker of Russian?			
.1	<i>YES</i> 79%	<i>NO</i> 18%	<i>Never thought about it</i> 3%
Does the topic of war / military action worry you personally as real-life phenomena?			
.2	<i>YES</i> 88%	<i>NO</i> 7%	<i>Never thought about it</i> 5%
How often do you use / hear / read these words in your communicative environment?			
.3	<i>Once a day</i> 57%	<i>More than once a day</i> 13%	<i>Once a week</i> 30%
Do you know the meaning of these terms? Have you ever looked into their semantics?			
.4	<i>YES</i> 3%	<i>NO</i> 57%	<i>Never thought about it</i> 40%

Table B. Associative-psychological perception of current political terminology (based on the results of the questionnaire – Stage II.1).

	Causes emotions of fear, suffering, hostility, compassion by association		Causes emotions of detachment, remoteness by association		Does not cause any emotions by association	
	II-a	II-b	II-a	II-b	II-a	II-b
<i>war</i>	100%	88%	-	-	-	12%
<i>terrorism</i>	13%	9%	80%	85%	7%	6%
<i>militant</i>	-	-	87%	85%	13%	15%
<i>extremist</i>	13%	9%	80%	85%	7%	6%
<i>terrorist</i>	13%	9%	80%	85%	7%	6%
<i>suicide attacker</i>	75%	75%	25%	20%	-	5%
<i>separatist</i>	10%	10%	80%	85%	10%	5%
<i>rebel fighter</i>	-	-	100%	87%	-	13%
<i>murderer</i>	100%	100%	-	-	-	-
<i>air strike</i>	-	-	87%	85%	13%	15%
<i>bombardment</i>	95%	90%	5%	5%	-	5%
<i>peacekeeper</i>	-	-	87%	85%	13%	15%
<i>refugee/refugees</i>	50%	45%	40%	40%	10%	15%
<i>cyber warfare</i>	-	-	65%	65%	35%	35%

Table C. The semantics of current socio-political terms as perceived by a group of socially active native speakers of Russian (based on the results of the linguistic experiment – Stage II.2).

Interpret the concept / term MILITANT.			
.1	film genre 50%	member of a terrorist group 50%	- -
Interpret the concept / term TERRORIST.			
.2	member of a terrorist group 50%	member of a terrorist group who uses weapons to defend his or her views 33%	someone who wants to destroy certain social norms 17%
Interpret the concept / term EXTREMIST.			
.3	someone holding extreme views 63%	member of an extremist organization 20%	someone who wants to destroy certain social norms 17%
Interpret the concept / term SEPARATIST.			
.4	someone holding extreme views 40%	someone who wants the separation of something 50%	someone who wants to destroy certain social norms 10%
Interpret the concept / term AIR STRIKE.			
.5	military action 100%	- -	- -
Interpret the concept / term PEACEKEEPER.			
.6	intermediary in an armed conflict 65%	someone enforcing peace with the help of weapons 15%	«Blue Helmets» 20%
Interpret the concept / term REBEL FIGHTER.			
.7	someone who fought in the War of 1812 77%	someone who joined the army voluntarily 5%	someone taking part in the military action in Ukraine 18%
Interpret the concept / term CYBER WARFARE.			
.8	a means of destroying social norms 46%	a way of fighting which can replace waging a war in which weapons are used 34%	a natural state of politics 20%