

KEY CONCEPTS OF OSCAR BEST PICTURE NOMINEES AT THE END OF THE 20TH – BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Lyudmila Mohelnytska

Abstract: The article presents key concepts of American cinematograph at the end of the XX – beginning of the XXI century, which are important for different filmmakers: actors, directors, scriptwriters and film critics. These filmmakers belong to the same language community and thus realize in their utterances the same – isomorphic – concepts of modern American cinematograph. Verbal means of key concepts representation in the filmmakers' utterances are considered. The content and structure of isomorphic key concepts are also described in the article.

Key words: key concepts, isomorphic concepts, American cinematograph, verbalization, frame structure.

Introduction

Concept has become one of the central linguistic problems within the cognitive-discourse paradigm (Babushkin 1996; Vežbickaja 1999; Popova and Sternin 1999; Stepanov 1997; Fodor 1998). Researchers pay special attention to studying key concepts of this or that culture. For example, Anna Wierzbicka distinguishes *good, truth, destiny* as cultural concepts or words-keys, which define basic ideas of social spiritual life (Wierzbicka, 1999: 263). Yu. S. Stepanov singled out a number of concepts which are basic for Russian culture: *love, soul, "our", "others", sin, etc.* (Stepanov 1997). A. Belova, V. Vojinov, E. N. Kearny study key concepts and values of American culture (Belova 1996; Belov 2002; Vojinov 1994; Kearny 1984). However basic concepts of modern American cinematograph haven't been researched yet.

The purposes of this article are to describe the content of the isomorphic concepts of American cinematograph at the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century; to find out their structure and to present language means of their realization in the utterances of moviemakers.

1. Cinematography texts study

One of the ways of studying cultural concepts is analyzing the plots of the most famous pieces of art, in particular books and movies (Karasik, 2002: 118). Feature films reflect certain fragments of the picture of the world as a system of knowledge, ideas of the world, beliefs, spiritual and material values of a society (Belova, 2001: 27). Knowledge of feature films is represented in the semantics of cinematography texts, analyzing such films. This knowledge can be revealed through language means. Language data enable us to restore some fragments of the reality reflected in movies. Cinematography texts of modern American periodicals inform about feature films, analyze and evaluate them from the point of view of different moviemakers. Scriptwriters, directors and actors analyze movies in the interviews. Critics inform about new cinematography news in summaries, and evaluate the pictures in synopses, capsules and reviews. The selected texts are devoted to the analysis of the films nominated for the best picture by American Academy of Movie Arts in 1998 – 2002:

1998 – “Titanic”, “L.A. Confidential”, “Good Will Hunting”

1999 – “Shakespeare in Love”, “Saving Private Ryan”, “Life is Beautiful”

2000 – “American Beauty”, “The Sixth Sense”, “The Insider”

2001 – “Gladiator”, “Erin Brockovich”, “Traffic”

2002 – “A Beautiful Mind”, “The Lord of the Rings”, “Moulin Rouge”

Thus, analysis of cinematography texts themes and different means of speech realization allowed singling out verbalized concepts of modern American cinematograph, important to scriptwriters, directors, actors and film critics. Moviemakers verbalize concepts of the reality, reflected in movies, according to their vision of this reality. A group of isomorphic concepts is realized in cinematography texts by all moviemakers: EVIL, RELATIONS, LIFE, DESEASE, POLITICS. According to the number of text fragments describing these concepts, they are divided into core and peripheral. The above mentioned concepts are core concepts. Isomorphic peripheral concepts are BUSINESS, JOURNEY, CHANGE, VALUE. Allomorphic concepts are verbalized in the utterances of only this or that group of moviemakers. The concept ART is significant to scriptwriters, directors and actors as people directly connected with the creative process. Concepts FREEDOM, ECOLOGY, GOOD, RELIGION are important to movie critics.

Content of a concept becomes more complicated in the course of cognitive and communicative activity of a man (Karasik, 2002: 163; Stepanov, 1997: 46). This process finds its reflection both in the structure of a concept and its hierarchy. Thus, the concepts WAR, DRUGS, CRIME, VIOLENCE make the concept of a higher abstraction level EVIL. The concept RELATIONSHIPS is structured by smaller concepts like FAMILY, LOVE, SEX, FRIENDSHIP.

2. Core isomorphic concepts

Content of core isomorphic concepts, means of their verbal manifestation in the utterances of scriptwriters, directors, actors and movie critics are considered further in the article.

2.1 Concept EVIL

Cultural concept EVIL is expressed by movie makers in cinematography texts by the language units *evil, wickedness, dark side, darkness*. Language units used by movie critics prove that evil is represented in their minds as a destructive power: *the power to destroy the world, destructive power*. Evil is so widespread that it has embraced entire worlds: *world of darkness, the ghost world, the dark realm, a blurry, blustery realm*. Movie critics use a lot of lexemes denoting evil dark forces: *the Dark Lord, Black Riders, dark forces, creatures of evil, the evil wizard, baddies, the bad guys, evil beings, negative images*.

Ugly, terrible creatures are called by lexical units evil beasties, monsters, a satanic like being, monstrous misshapen Orcs, a horrific cave troll and the dreaded Balrog, dire Uruk-hai. Such creatures are united into armies: the armies of the Dark Lord, platoons from his monster and goblin army, armies of screeching. Evil is hidden within human nature and movie characters have to fight it resisting the influence of evil forces: Many of Tolkien's main characters have a moment of confrontation with their dark side – they have to choose between taking on the evil power of the Ring or resisting it (<http://www.eonline.com>). Critics using such language units as destroy all the evil in the world, good vs. evil point out a sacred obligation of movie characters – to save the world from evil and to win in the eternal confrontation of good vs. evil: But when he's [Gandalf] focused, he's the right man for the job which is to help the Hobbits and destroy all the evil in the world (<http://www.scifitalk.com>); ... "The Lord of the Rings" is at heart a parable of good vs. evil (WP 19.12.01).

The abundance of violence and aggression in modern cinematography has activated the concept VIOLENCE, which is connected with the concept EVIL. This concept is verbally realized by moviemakers with the help of lexical units *violence, violent*. To denote a murder actors use such language units as *to get killed, killing, a killer, movie critics – to dispatch, to kill, massacre, murder, to thrust swords into one’s gut, to decapitate, carnage, to butcher, mutilations, stabbings*. Language units found in critics’ speech -- *deaths, blood and destruction, severed limbs, bloodlust, crowds thirsting for violence; blood and guts in the arena* -- mean, that they single out death and blood in the structure of the concept VIOLENCE.

Analysis of lexical representations of the concepts EVIL and VIOLENCE enables us to model their structure by means of a subject and action frame (terms suggested by Žabotinskaja, 2002: 119-120):

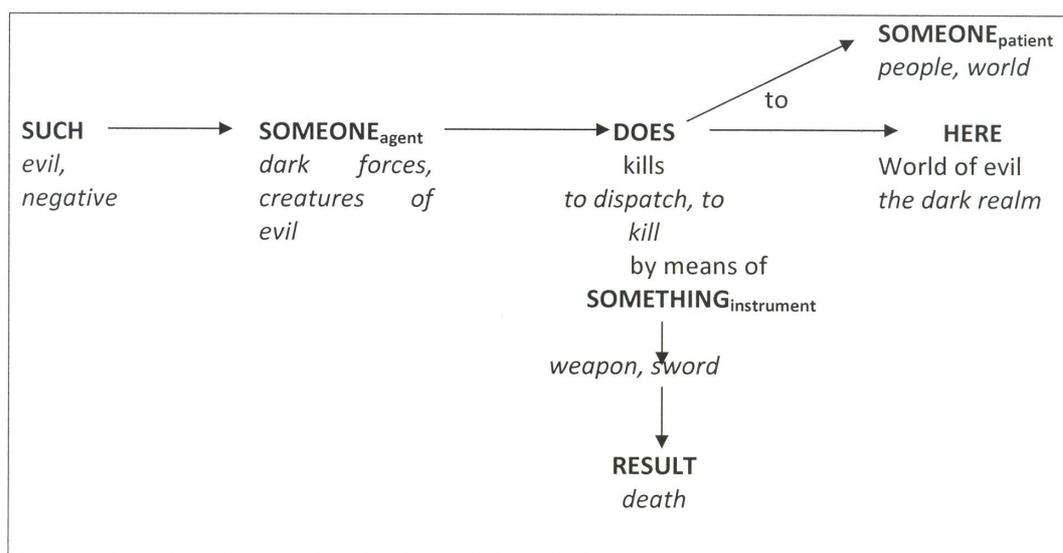


Figure 1. Frame structure of concepts EVIL and VIOLENCE

Slot **SOMEONE_{agent}** is filled with lexical units naming those who do evil and violence: the Dark Lord, Black Riders, dark forces, creatures of evil, Orcs, cave troll, wizard, baddies, the bad guys, evil beings, monsters, a killer. There are also lexemes which denote their qualities or characteristics [**SUCH**]: bad, dark, Black, evil, monstrous, misshapen, horrific. Evil forces do evil and violence [**DOES**] – kill and destroy the world: to dispatch, to kill, to thrust swords into one’s gut, to decapitate, to butcher, to destroy the world. Numerous synonyms denoting killing demonstrate that it is the most widespread act of violence. Slot **SOMEONE_{patient}** denotes

those who suffer from acts of violence and influence of evil forces: people, world, gut, head. The lexemes weapon, sword, Ring name the instruments of evil [SOMETHING_{instrument}] – weapons and magic objects. Slot HERE actualizes the place where acts of violence happen: the Colosseum, the arena, world of darkness, the ghost world, the dark realm. The result of evil and violence is death, blood, destruction: deaths, blood, destruction, severed limbs.

Using the language units *a slice of life, expressing life* movie makers emphasize that violence on the screen reflects the presence of this phenomenon in real life, e.g. *How do you feel about violence in movies in general? – "It's a slice of life. This happens in life. A film is an artistic venture. It's expressing life, so why not?" (<http://www.aboutfilm.com>). Though presenting violence in a movie has different purposes. War violence in "Saving Private Ryan" is aimed at showing all horrors of war events and to prevent people from repeating them once again. Actors and the director of the film state that such acts of violence will never make a man imitate them in real life: *Kids cannot go out and really imitate [war violence]: It would bring into account what a horrible thing it is to pull a trigger on a weapon and send a hot piece of metal through somebody's head ... (<http://www.sunnews.com>); Showing war as it really is a different kind of violence. Kids cannot go out and really imitate it ... (LAT 15.7.98).**

2.2 Concept HUMAN RELATIONS

A human being cannot exist outside the society or community, otherwise he is helpless and unsafe. Only together with others he can oppose an evil and horrible world: : ... *it's about communication. It has a message in communication and what bad things happen when you don't talk to each other* (<http://www.geocities.com>). Relationships between the film characters attract most of all: *When I saw The Insider, I was just completely taken with how Michael's camera works and the character's relationship and all that* (<http://www.maximumcrowe.net>). Thus, concept HUMAN RELATIONS, realized in moviemakers' speech through the unit *relationship* is important to them. Scriptwriters present this concept by means of such lexemes as *fellowship, disconnection, rift* and word combinations *to get together, an alienation factor, sense of community, racial attitudes*. Actors use lexical units *relationship, communication, to deal with people* to denote the above mentioned concept. Nominative units used by scriptwriters, directors, actors denote such elements of the concept HUMAN RELATIONS as making contact (*to get together, to make*

friends, courtship, fall in love), supporting the relations (*relationship, fellowship, communication, sense of community, to deal with people, to make love, to stick together*), disconnection (*disconnection, rift, an alienation factor, divorce*):

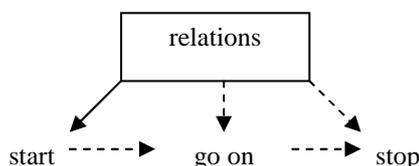


Figure 2. Scheme of the concept HUMAN RELATIONS

The concept HUMAN RELATIONS verbalization in film critics' speech proves that they single out certain fragments within this concept corresponding to different kinds of relationships denoted by the lexemes *compete, betrayal, credibility, trust, fascinated, protect, empathy, ignore, hostile, conflict, adoration*. For example Nash's relationships (A Beautiful Mind) with students turned to competition because of his talents: ... he competes with the other students in Princeton's brutally competitive math department... (<http://www.romanticmovies.about.com>). And "Good Will Hunting" characters sympathize with each other, love and take care: There's empathy between them (SB 25.12.97); The pals ... love and protect Will in a way that, apparently, no one else has (NYT 5.12.97).

The concept HUMAN RELATIONS includes concepts FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, SEX, FAMILY.

Concept FRIENDSHIP is actualized in cinematography texts through lexical units *friendship, friend, cronies, buddy, companion, to make friends*. Speech material analysis showed that films demonstrate a serious attitude to friendship: The movie is a lot about friendships, and how strong we are if we stand together. How important is friendship in your life? – Oh, it's very, very important. Both friends and family! Jobs, money, fame – it can go away in a second. Friends you know will always be there for you (<http://www.romanticmovies.about.com>); Here is a character who has four friends who love and want to help him ... (CST 12.12.97). So, friendship makes people stronger, friends and family are extremely important, as work, fame, money can disappear in a moment, but friends will always be with you ready to love and help.

As a rule there is not any film without passionate love accompanied by dangers, adventures, tragic events, etc. Thus concept LOVE turns out to be activated in all

moviemakers' utterances and it is presented by such lexemes as *love, romance, love story*. In addition scriptwriters denote this subconcept by word combinations *romantic comedy, to fall in love*; directors – *intimate story*, actors – *emotions, affection, courtship, passion, the love scenes, to stick together, the love relationship*, film critics – *to fall in love, to fall for somebody, the eternal romantic triangle, love affair, affection, passion, deep feelings, lovers*. For example: *"Moulin Rouge" is about... contemplation of truth, beauty and love (WP 1.6.01). ... he [director] paid attention to the details of what was going on in the love relationship between Kate and me (<http://www.omnileonardo.com>). But unfortunately true love is never happy: The course of true love never did run smooth (SFC 25.12.98).*

Movie critics single out problems within the concept LOVE which become obstacles on the way of love between two people. They are class inequality, poverty, illness: *... he falls in love with Lady Viola de Lesseps ... But there's a problem: She's upper class and he's working class (MST 25/12/98). ... story ... concerns a poet, Christian, who adores courtesan Satine, star of the Moulin Rouge nightclub. His poverty, her consumption and a rich rival are some of the obstacles to his love (FJI).*

Love takes you to sexual relations (love resulting in gauzy sex scenes), for example: Will meets Viola, he doesn't realize she is also the new actor, and they fall in love (resulting in gauzy sex scenes) (SFE 25/12/98). Sexual fantasizing on the screen is a projection of mass ideas of love, erotic, relationships between two sexes. Erotic theme is being intensely worked in modern cinematography, as human body is regarded as a possibility of love between human beings. In cinematography texts we find lexemes, denoting a nude sexually attractive body: *nudity, naked, her nubile body*. The presence of language units naming sexual relationships in cinematography texts proves that films activate the concept SEX in moviemakers' minds. Scriptwriters name sexual relationships emotionally intense relationships, directors use such lexical means as the sexual tension, a sexual activity, sexuality, to be intimate, graphic sex scenes, film critics – *pleasures of the flesh, to bed somebody, to make love to smb., to have sex*, for example: *Soon they're fucking and the iambic pentameter is flowing back and forth between them* (VV 9-15/12/98).

Film critics denote problems, connected with sexual dissatisfaction: *masturbate, repressed sexual longing, sexually closeted person, to pleasure oneself in one's morning shower, voyeur, sexual frustration*. Because of sexual problems with his wife Lester Burnham

(American Beauty) masturbates fantasizing about his daughter's friend: Lester masturbates a lot, especially when he gets to thinking about his daughter's friend Angela, the American Beauty of the title (Time 20/9/99). Nominative units homosexuality, gay, bisexuality, sexual bonds with other men, soliciting sex in a men's room, a gay couple, a homosexual pair selected from movie makers' utterances mean nontraditional sexual relationships, reflect sexual deviations: The subjects of my films have sort of ... they were about gay characters (<http://www.findarticles.com>).

Concept FAMILY is considered a key one in the mind of American community (Belova 2002; Vojinovic 1994; Kearny 1984). In the course of analysis we found out that the plot of 12 out of 16 films under consideration is connected with family issues. The concept FAMILY is activated in cinematography texts through such lexical units as *family, husband, wife, couple, parents, father, mother, children, babies, kids, daughter, son, widow*. Context usage of lexical units allows to study the characteristics of the concept, presented in cinematography texts and described in (Vachovska 2003).

2.3 Concept LIFE

Verbalization of the concept LIFE proves that all moviemakers pay attention to different aspects of human life, reflected in cinematograph. Word phrases *the traumatic life of mathematics genius, Lester's / Nash's / his life* denote life of one person, such lexemes as *personal, sexual, social, home, family, professional* specify certain aspects of life. The lexemes *modern, urban-suburban* describe modern city and suburban life: *If Lester's home life is bad, his professional life is even worse (SB 24.9.99). American Beauty is a brilliant satirical diagnosis of what's most screwed up about life in this country, especially when it comes to sexual frustration and kiddie porn (www.spacefinder.chicagoreader.com)*. The given examples demonstrate connection and interdependence of different aspects of human life. Problems in personal life (*home life is bad*) have a negative impact on professional life (*professional life is even worse*), and all this related to a general decadence of the country (*life in this country*).

Nominative units themes, the meaning of life point out that one of the basic topics raised by cinematograph is meaning and sense of life: There are many themes in GOOD WILL HUNTING – materialism versus human values, particular people's importance in our lives, even the meaning of life itself. – We cared about all of those things... (www.whyy.org).

In linguistic literature the concept LIFE is metaphorically presented in terms of the concept ROAD/WAY: *Without looking down at life, he passes it off as easy* (<http://www.well-rounded.com>). This knowledge scheme includes several main structural elements: beginning of the road, stages, obstacles and the end of the road. The end of a life road is death. To denote it scriptwriters use the lexemes *mortality, death*; directors – *to die a death*, actors – *to die, to murder, to kill*, critics – *death, dead, departed, dead bodies, corpses and hangings, to die, to face death, to commit suicide, funeral, to bury*, e.g: *She sings, she dances and then she dies* (<http://www.iofilm.co.uk> http://www.iofilm.co.uk/feats/interviews/n/nicole_kidman.shtml). Aging and death are regarded by moviemakers as inevitable things, that you have to endure: *We took from that the idea that aging and death can't be changed, but must be accepted* (<http://www.wga.org>).

2.4 Concept ILLNESS

Concept ILLNESS is verbalized in speech of all four groups of moviemakers. Nominative units used by different moviemakers show a different vision of the same concept and enable us to reveal the concept structure. They verbalize those different slots of the concept, which are singled out by scriptwriters, directors, actors and critics. The slots make an object and action frame:

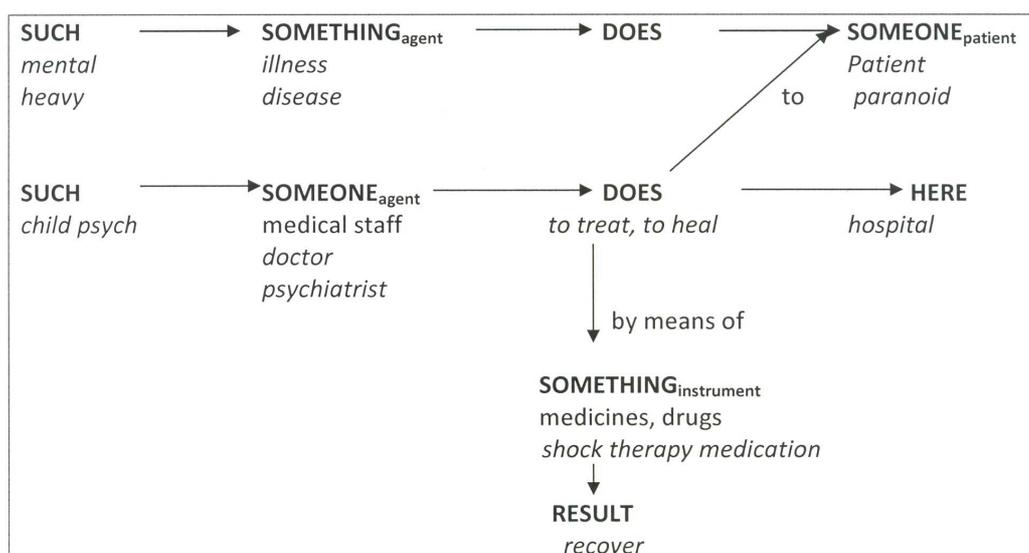


Figure 3. Frame structure of concept ILLNESS

Illness [SOMETHING_{agent}] is an obligatory slot represented in all moviemakers' utterances by the following lexical nominations of illnesses – *illness, disease, malady, schizophrenia, delusions, madness, hallucinations, paranoia, breakdown, dementia, drug addiction, cough, consumption, cancer, tumors* – accompanied by the kinds [SUCH] (*mental illnesses, paranoid schizophrenia, psychological problems*) and characteristics of an illness (*a heavy psychological toll, severe psychological problems, nasty cough, malignant tumors*). The actor states in the following example that the basic task of "A Beautiful Mind" was to show the nature of such illness as schizophrenia: *"The basic concept was the nature of schizophrenia," he says. "Fifty percent of what he believed to be absolutely real was actually false. A complete half of one's life was only his imagination" (<http://www.maximumcrowe.net>).*

The concept ILLNESS is realized in movie critics' utterances through the lexemes denoting those who fall ill: *patient, paranoid*. These units fill in the slot SOMEONE_{patient}. Film critics also actualize the slot SOMEONE_{agent}, connected with the slots SUCH, DOES, SOMETHING_{instrument}, HERE. The slot SOMEONE_{agent} means medical staff who treats [DOES] patients [SOMEONE_{patient}] by means of medicines and drugs [SOMETHING_{instrument}] at hospitals [HERE]. The slot SOMEONE_{agent} is filled in with the nominations of doctors: *doctor, psychiatrist, therapist, psychologist, professor, psychotherapist*. The slot SUCH indicates doctors' specialization: *child psychologist, a psych professor*. The slot DOES is represented by the lexemes *treatment, to treat, to heal*. The slot SOMETHING_{instrument} is activated by language units *drugs, cure therapy, agonizing courses of insulin shock therapy, medication*, the slot HERE is filled in with *psychiatric hospitals, a mental hospital*. The following example demonstrates verbal manifestation of the slots: *The movie traces his treatment by an understanding psychiatrist (Christopher Plummer), and his agonizing courses of insulin shock therapy. Medication helps him improve somewhat – but only, of course, when he takes the medication (CST 21.12.01).*

Scriptwriters activate the slot RESULT which is a recover after treatment (*recover, to get their lives back, anti-psychotic drugs, his remission from schizophrenia, the diet of the mind*). But recover is possible only if a patient is supported by his family and friends: *Not only did Nash recover, but millions of young people – who now have the added benefit of new drugs developed since Nash's illness – are managing to get their lives back with the support of their families and communities (<http://www.geocities.com>).*

Conclusion

Analysis of the most popular movie plots makes it possible to single out significant cultural concepts. The cinematography texts under study contain knowledge of films, rewarded with the best picture title by American Academy of Movie Arts in 1998 – 2002. The cinematography texts analysis enabled us to determine verbalized concepts of American cinematograph at the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century. The concepts which were singled out are significant for actors, directors, scriptwriters and movie critics. Due to the fact that all the above mentioned moviemakers belong to the same language community the concepts found out showed isomorphism. According to the number of cinematography texts fragments describing the concepts under study the latter are divided into core and peripheral. Common core concepts are EVIL, HUMAN RELATIONS, LIFE, ILLNESS, POLITICS. The concept HUMAN RELATIONS is structured by minor concepts FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, SEX, FAMILY. The concept EVIL includes the concepts WAR, CRIME, DRUGS, VIOLENCE. To realize the same concepts in cinematography texts moviemakers use different nominative units, denoting different fragments of the concepts. The singled out concepts are modeled with the help of a subject and action frame.

References

- Babushkin, A. P. (1996): *Tipy konceptov v leksiko-frazeologičeskoj semantike jazyka*, Voronež: Izd-vo VGU.
- Belova, A. D. (2002): *Leksična semantika i mižkulturni stereotipi*, In: *Movni i konceptualni kartini svitu*: 36. nauk. prac, No. 7.m, pp. 43-54.
- Belova, A. D. (2001): *Movni kartini svitu: principi utvorenja ta skladovi*, In: *Problemi semantiki slova, rečennja ta tekstu*: 36. nauk. statej, Vip. 7, pp. 26- 30.
- Belova, A. D. and Michnenko, M. K. (1996): *O nekotorych lingvističeskich aspektach amerikanizma*, In: *Filologija i kul'tura*: 36. nauk. pr., pp. 15-20.
- Fodor, J. A. (1998): *Concepts. Where cognitive went wrong*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Karasik, V. I. (1999): *Jazykovej krug: ličnost, koncepty, diskurz*, Volgograd: Peremena.
- Kearny, E. N. (1984): *The American Way. An Introduction to American Culture*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Popova, Z. D. and Sternin, I. A. (1999): *Ponjatje "concept" v lingvističeskich issledovanijach*, Voronež: Voronežskij goc. un-t.

Stepanov, Ju. S. (1997): Konstanty. Slovar ruskoj kul'tury, M.: Jazyky ruskoj kul'tury.

Vachovska, L. F. (2003): Verbalne vtillennja konceptu SIM'JA v amerikanskomu kinematografi (na materialy sučasnoji amerikanskoji publicistiki), In: Nauka i sučasnist': 36. nauk. pr., T. 37. – K.: Logos, pp. 155-161.

Vežbickaja, A. (1999): Semantičeskie universalii i opisanie jazykov, M.: Jazyky ruskoj kul'tury.

Vojinov, V. V. (1994): Social'no-ocinočni nominacii u konteksti kul'turi SŠA, K.: Libid'.

Žabotinskaja, S. A. (2002): Onomastiologičeskie modeli v svete sovremennyh napravlenij kognitivnoj lingvistiki, In: Slobovju k jazyku: sb. naukovich tr., M., Voronež : IJA RAN, Voronežskij goc. un-t., pp. 115-123.

List of periodicals

CST: Chicago Sun-Times

SB: Sacramento Bee

FJI: Film Journal International

SFC: San-Francisco Chronicle

LAT: Los Angeles Times

SFE: San-Francisco Examiner

MST: Minneapolis Star Tribune

VV: The Village Voice

NYT: The New York Times

WP: The Washington Post

RDC: Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

Author

Lyudmila Mohelnytska, Associate Professor, Candidate of Philological Sciences, Zhytomyr State Technological University, Zhytomyr; Ukraine; e-mail: mogeln_l@ukr.net
