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A corpus analysis of the representation
of war in Ukraine in the international press

This paper explored the representation of war in Ukraine, utilizing corpus linguistics methods. It presents the gleanings of the analysis of the international press release covering the period February 24th - November 1st, based on a specialized corpus (1 081 971 tokens) of world newspaper articles compiled for this study. Using the LancsBox software package, a keyword analysis was carried out, providing a window into lexical patterns and typical themes associated with the war in Ukraine. The study highlighted the quantitative characteristics of the target corpus by singling out keywords and their collocates, followed by a qualitative interpretation of their usage in context. The themes commonly referenced in the target corpus were as follows: military intervention, actors/agents, implements, consequences, victims, description and attitudes, resistance, and economy. On the paradigmatic level, the highest occurrences were documented for lexemes war, invasion, and conflict as referents to the concept of ongoing warfare. On the syntagmatic level, lexically rich were the themes of attitudes towards war and its influence on the global economy. Negative discourse prosodies were evident in the discussion of war and some of its agents. In sum, the paper helps understand public attitudes and evaluation of war in the news coverage, which shape the image of Ukraine in the global arena.

Keywords: *corpus linguistics, international, keywords, newspaper, themes, Ukraine, war.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of linguistic information on the public's cognitions and attitudes has been widely acknowledged [1, p. 71]. However, with the outbreak of a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, the study of its representation in the media has gained an unprecedented r e l e v a n c e . Since one of the media's implicit functions, among others, includes shaping public opinion and thinking [8], it is essential to understand what language means are pervasively used to represent the ongoing warfare in the international media.

The present paper a i m s to provide an account of the representation of war in Ukraine and a range of pertinent themes covered in the media. In particular, this study focuses on the linguistic choices recurring in the international press since the commencement of war on February 24th of the current year using corpus linguistics methods. Thus, the o b j e c t of the present study is the war discourse presented in the international newspapers, while its s u b j e c t is the lexical features of the war discourse. The study presents the gleanings obtained from the analysis of the international press reports from February 24th to November 1st based on a specialized corpus (1 081 971 tokens) of world newspaper articles compiled for the purposes of this study. To unravel the representation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the media, the following research questions were addressed: RQ1: What language means are used to describe the war in Ukraine in the newspapers? RQ2: How is the theme of war constructed in the international press?

In the next section of the paper, we draw on the analysis of pertinent literature to locate the present study. Following it the data collection procedure and methodology are described. Next, analysis and discussion of the results are presented, finalized by the conclusions drawn from the obtained findings.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study of media coverage of the war in Ukraine has been attempted in literature from different methodological perspectives, foci, and objectives. Thus, applying a cognitive-pragmatic approach, I. Shevchenko et al. studied the nominations of Russia's armed conflict against Ukraine in the English language media between 2014–2022. Using a semantic analysis of lexemes representing the given concept (e.g., war, operation, crisis), the authors establish their semantic volume. It is argued in the paper that "war" is the most accurate lexeme denoting the current state of aggression, while other referents (e.g., crisis, special operation, conflict) serve to distort reality and manipulate public opinion [1].

Using the framing methodology, P. Vrba explores the lexical patterns in the war narratives based on the speeches of the presidents of the USA, Ukraine, and Russia. Analyzed were also texts from CNN to look into the frequently used language means in the pre-war and during the war news coverage. According to the study's principal finding, Presidents Zelensky and Biden were framed neutrally in the press. Likewise, the President of Russia was framed neutrally in the pre-war period. However, following the beginning of a full-scale war on February 24th, 2022, a demonstrable shift occurred with the media employing more negative frames [10].

A small-scale corpus-based study conducted by A. Kryzhanivska reported dissimilarities in the lexical patterns of the news coverage by the British, Ukrainian, and Russian media. The author set out to explore the representation of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict and its impact on the reader. By looking at the most frequent lexical items in the specialized corpus, she argues that the British media view Putin as a victimizer, while the Russian media blame the USA. Finally, the Ukrainian newspapers highlight the hardships of the current state of affairs in the country [7].

A notable contribution to the analysis of the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine is the study of framing shifts in the pro-Russian propaganda discourse by S. Alzahrami et al. The researchers contend that Russian propaganda employs information operations to shift public attitudes towards support of military aggression. By studying framing shifts employed during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, they arrive at the conclusion that the Russian newspapers use information operations to prime the public to the forthcoming hostility. The authors propose a conjecture that shifts in the propaganda framing could forecast the onset of military intervention [2]. Based on this, it stands to reason that the current war could have been foreseen by observing the dominant narratives in the media.

As can be seen from the existing research, little is known in terms of lexical patterns foregrounding the dominant themes in the international news coverage. Most studies have limited their focus to certain aspects of the researched problem, yielding significant implications. However, a corpus-based analysis of the international news coverage of the war in Ukraine needs continuous updating, which predetermines this study's relevance.

3. METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, a specialized corpus of 4209 leading world newspaper articles was constructed with a total number of 1 081 971 words. Figure 1 displays some of the newspaper titles and the number of articles included in each. The articles were selected with the assistance of a news aggregator service LexisNexis. The news coverage spanning the timeline from February 24th – November 1st was included marking the beginning of the Russian military assault on Ukraine. The principal search term to query the international press release was "war in Ukraine." It was considered the most direct and salient in representing the public opinion of the researched issue. The corpus incorporated the articles containing the given search term either in their title or text.

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Thus, corpus linguistics techniques were used to explore the representation of the war in Ukraine in major world newspapers. C. Dayrell et al. contend that this approach enables the analyst to focus on both quantitative characteristics of data (e.g., by singling out word frequencies or collocates) and qualitative (e.g., by paying heed to the contextualized use of query terms) [5]. The target corpus was processed by applying the software package LancsBox. To observe the salient linguistic features of the target corpus, keyword analysis was first run. Keywords can be identified by using various keyness measures. Keyness refers to words that occur more frequently in the target corpus than in the reference corpus [6]. Keyword analysis was regarded particularly suitable to answering the study's research questions in that keywords appear to reflect the socio-cultural meaning [11] and prominent narratives. The keywords were next analyzed for their collocates. As V. Brezina et al. argue, texts are organized into lexical patterns, or networks of words collocating with one another, thus enhancing "our understanding of the relationship between the lexis and the text and (ultimately) between the text and the discourse community/the mind of the speaker." [4, p. 139]. It was, therefore, possible to explore the dominant discourses surrounding the issues of the Russian-Ukrainian war by studying collocates in the corpus.

The procedure ran as follows: first, the keywords were generated using the Graphcoll and Words techniques. The salience of keywords was calculated through the 03-MI statistical procedure to observe the frequencies of lexemes in the target corpus compared to the reference corpus. In our case, BNC2014-baby, available through the LancsBox interface, was used. The following criteria were applied in the analysis of collocates: span – 5:5, statistical procedure – 03-MI, statistic value threshold - 5.0| CPN: 03 - MI (5.0)/ L5-R5/ C: 15.0-NC: 15.0. The statistical association measure 03-MI was selected as it identifies exclusive collocates and mainly lexical words. Thus, using corpus analysis, quantitative characteristics of the lexis in the target corpus were established, followed by qualitative interpretation of the obtained findings. It helped to deal with the reliability of the study by counteracting the arbitrariness of interpretation [9].

4. FINDINGS

To observe the war narratives in the international media, this study focused on the keyness of the target corpus. The analysis steers from the identification of keywords to an elucidation of the principal themes. Table 1 presents the twenty most frequent keywords of the target corpus in comparison to the reference corpus. The first observation of the list reveals the three lexical items designating the military intervention (war=25138; invasion=1996, conflict=1255) and its main agents (e.g., Ukraine=27412, Russia=7554, Putin=3045, president=2219, NATO=1320).

Table 1

Top 20 keywords in the Target Corpus

Lemma	Frequency	Statistic
1. ukraine_n	27412.000000	254.9472487731
2. war_n	25138.000000	94.1830673575
3. russia_n	7554.000000	60.9561825944
4. russian_adj	4504.000000	39.6377533302
5. putin_n	3045.000000	31.4164122497
6. ukrainian_adj	1873.000000	20.2262939686
7. invasion_n	1996.000000	19.0139123762
8. president_n	2219.000000	15.5367866014
9. nato_n	1320.000000	14.1041789015
10. moscow_n	1077.000000	11.2576154225
11. kyiv_n	948.000000	10.975713
12. nuclear_adj	1071.000000	10.6028120282
13. military_adj	1251.000000	9.5723722047
14. troop_n	869.000000	8.516979548
15. conflict_n	1255.000000	8.43248725
16. sanction_n	727.000000	8.1627299089
17. biden_n	610.000000	7.4042375672
18. un_n	774.000000	7.3111442101
19. u.s._n	628.000000	7.2615020472
20. kremlin_n	583.000000	6.9956123321

In the next stage, the lexeme "war" and some keywords were subject to a collocation analysis. The collocations can yield insight into semantic preference and prosody and help understand how themes are represented in the discourse (Bednarek, 2008). Table 2 displays the keywords in the target corpus grouped thematically. The generated keywords and the collocates of *war* uncovered the themes prominently featuring in the target corpus as opposed to the reference corpus.

Table 2

Keywords in the Target Corpus organized by theme

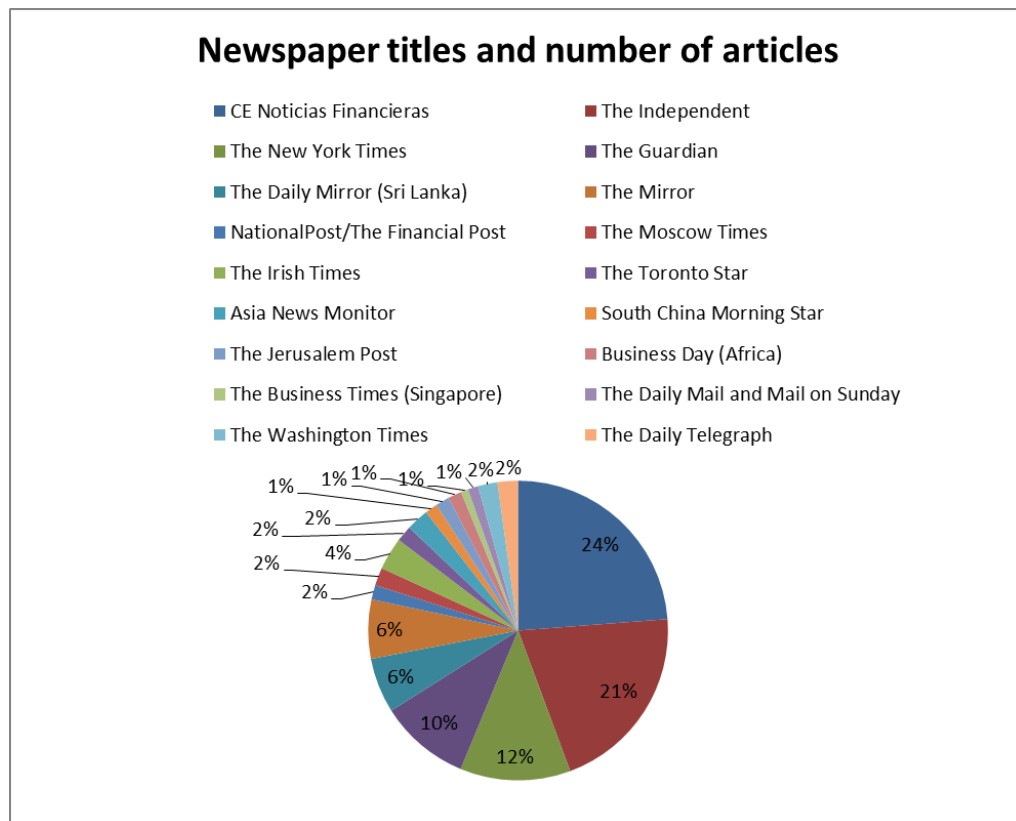| Themes	Keywords
Military intervention	war, invasion, military, conflict, attack, aggression, invade, fight, retake, strike
Actors/agents	Ukraine, Russia, Putin, president, NATO, Moscow, Kyiv, Biden, UN, US, Kremlin, Zelensky, Europe, China, ally, Pope, soldier, Belarus, Iran, dictator
Implements	nuclear, troop, missile, weapon, drone
Consequences	crisis, flee, crime
Victims	refugee, civilian, nation, women, families, men
Description and attitudes	cold, drags, fears, cruel, senseless, blunt, sour, appallingly, hate, needless, deplore, full-blown, dangerous, darkness, elusive, deplore, revolt, criticize, proxy
Resistance	bravery, winning, patience, patriotic, defeat, defense
Economic issues	sanction, global, supply, inflation, gas, price, energy, grain, oil, wheat, export, economy, fuel, economic, food, support

Figure 1. Newspaper titles and number of texts

Military intervention. The prevalent lexical field of the target corpus is related to the current military intervention. The given theme is emphasized through lexemes pointing to aggression and attempts to counteract it (e.g., war, invasion, conflict, attack, aggression, fight, and retake). The paradigmatically related lexemes *war, invasion, and conflict* have shared collocates with the lexical field pertaining to the consequences of warfare, public attitudes, and its description. They enter into syntagmatic relations with other keywords by sharing collocates as, for instance, *crimes, attrition, drags, accidents, senseless, flees, and escalate.* Condemnation of aggression and support for Ukraine emerge as recurrent discourses further supported by qualitative analysis of concordance lines, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Figure 2. Results of collocation analysis of lemma "war" in the target corpus

The Ukrainian army is humiliating them. Western officials suggested last night that Vladimir Putin was likely to continue his deadly <u>war of attrition</u> (The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday (London) | Mar 19, 2022)

For all its bravery and resolve, Kyiv can hold off but not defeat a neighbor more than three times its size in a <u>war of attrition</u>. That means Ukraine needs to do more than slow down the Russian army. It needs to break its spine as quickly as possible (Las Vegas Sun | Jun 19, 2022).

Actors/agents. As shown by the keyword analysis, one of the major themes in the war discourse concerns the persons or parties actively involved in the warfare. The target corpus is notable for the frequent use of proper nouns, including personal and geographical names, signaling the persons and areas affecting or affected by the war. As can be seen from the choice of lexical means, in addition to lexemes *Ukraine* and *Russia*, representing the opposing sides, the most frequently used lemmas are *Putin, president, NATO, Moscow, Kyiv, Biden, UN, US, Kremlin*, etc. The analysis revealed that Putin is predominantly represented in the media as the principal actor initiating war, affirmed by the excerpts below. Interestingly, Zelensky occupies only the 26th position in the list of keywords with a frequency of 518 occurrences as compared to Putin (5th position, 3045 occurrences, Table 2).

The French president has been clear from the start: Putin alone is to blame for the death and destruction in Ukraine and the major consequences of the war

for France and Europe (The Independent. (United Kingdom) | Mar 07, 2022)

Most of the world has loudly and unequivocally condemned Mr. Putin for sparking a war with Ukraine. (The New York Times - International Edition | Mar 19, 2022)

The media ascribe a prominent role in the warfare to *NATO, Biden, the UN, the US, Zelensky, Europe, China, Pope Francis, Belarus, Iran,* etc. According to the results of the collocation analysis, the lemma *dictator* and its derivative *dictatorship* are close collocates of the node *war.* A close inspection of the concordance lines revealed that this lemma referred to the current president of Russia. In a few cases, however, it also referred to other parties, the choice depending on the article's source.

The articles on Lenta.ru called President Vladimir Putin a "pitiful paranoid <u>dictator</u>" and accused him of waging "the bloodiest war of the 21st century". (The Guardian| May 09, 2022)

"We are in a dramatic situation. We have a war on the border of Europe, of the European Union - there is a <u>dictator</u> threatening us with nuclear weapons. (The Irish Times | Mar 03, 2022)

Jacobs is also deluded if he believes the war is about freedom and democracy. Not only is the US a military <u>dictatorship</u> that masquerades as a democracy, it is also fast degenerating into a neo-fascist state. (Business Day (South Africa) | Oct 18, 2022)

As seen in Table 3, among the close left-hand descriptors of the lemma *Putin* in the target corpus are *panicking and desperate.* The right-hand close collocates include *dangerous, accountable, barbarism,* etc., thus providing evidence of his direct negative representation in the international news release.

Implements of warfare. Among the topmost lexical patterns is a group of lexemes pertaining to the implements of war, both animate and inanimate. Prominence is given to lexemes *nuclear, troop, missile, weapon,* and *drone.* Nuclear serves to refer to the imminent threat of instrumentalizing a specific type of weapon or energy to cause destruction.

He accused Mr. Putin of making "irresponsible <u>nuclear</u> threats" and declared that "a <u>nuclear</u> war cannot be won, and must never be fought." (The New York Times | Sep 21, 2022)

Among the most frequent collocates of the lemma *nuclear* are *weapon, threat, plant, power, fear,* etc., as illustrated in Figure 3.

Consequences and victims. The consequences of war are depicted through lemmas *crisis, flee, crime,* and the victimized (e.g., *refugees, civilian, nation, women, families*) collocating with *accidents, casualties, fatigue, unpredictability, encroach,* and others. Additionally, the close collocates of lexemes *war* and *conflict* were *flee, attrition,* and *escalate.*

... civilian <u>casualties</u> in Ukraine could be in the tens of thousands; there are now 6.6 million <u>refugees</u> from the war. (The New York Times | Aug 24, 2022)

The suffering of the millions of <u>refugees</u> from Ukraine in Poland is a constant reminder of how real - and close - the war is. (The New York Times | Apr 17, 2022)

Attitudes and description. The collocates of the lexeme *war* illustrate negative discourse prosody (e.g., *cruel, senseless, unwinnable, appallingly, needless, full-blown, dangerous, darkness, grinding*). The lemmas *drags* and *grinds* collocating with *war* also indicate pessimism. Public condemnation is revealed through its collocating with *revolt, criticize, protests, hate. Cold* and *proxy* as frequent collocates of *war* point to a longstanding opposition between the former USSR

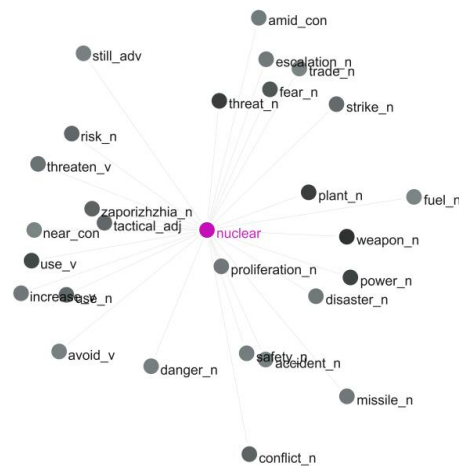*Figure 3. Collocates of lemma nuclear in the target corpus*

Table 3

Collocates of lemma *Putin* in the target corpus

Position	Collocate	Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
r	1. dangerous_adj	7.8123740518920854	16	16
l	2. panicking_n	7.812368623178284	22	22
l	3. vladimir_n	7.772094968235232	1201	1235
l	4. disagree_v	7.397334846444276	15	20
l	5. desperate_n	7.227408707556291	16	24
r	6. accountable_adj	6.844079688856413	23	45
r	7. blitz_n	6.749633395850191	45	94
l	8. barbarism_n	6.674865099428607	15	33
r	9. sham_adj	6.674865099428607	20	44
r	10. chilling_adj	6.624744343814975	18	41

and the USA. Today's war in Ukraine is represented in the news release by many as the legacy of the earlier conflict having ramifications in the present. Reference is made to NATO's indirectly waging war against Russia.

Russia 's foreign minister has accused Nato of fighting a <u>proxy war</u> by supplying military aid to Ukraine. Sergei Lavrov told Russian state media: "Nato, in essence, is engaged in a war with

Russia through a <u>proxy</u> and is arming that <u>proxy</u>. War means war." (The Guardian (London) | Apr 26, 2022)

Resistance. Resistance of Ukraine and world democracies is a prominent theme in the international newspapers, as signaled by keywords *defeat, patriotic, retake*, and *war* collocating with *bravery, winning, patience*, and *preventing*.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday pledged to keep up France 's humanitarian, economic and military support to Ukraine and to bolster European unity as a way to pile pressure on Russia and prevent it from <u>winning</u> it war in that country... (The Independent | Sep 01, 2022)

No amount of threats and propaganda can hide the fact that Ukraine is <u>winning</u> this war. (The Independent | Sep 21, 2022)

Economy. A recurrent theme in the media deriving from the lexical patterns of the target corpus lays emphasis on economic issues. It is evident due to the high frequencies of lemmas *sanction, global, supply, inflation,* and *price* featuring among the top 50 keywords. The keywords project problems with energy and food shortages, e.g., *gas, energy, oil, grain, wheat, export, food*, and *fuel*.

On the whole, this study's findings are only partly comparable to earlier research on the press release discourse associated with the war in Ukraine. Thus, these results, in part, run counter to the findings of I. Shevchenko et al. in that the three lexemes with the highest rate of occurrence were *war, invasion*, and *conflict* in this study [1]. In contrast, in the above publication, *crisis, special operation, war, armed conflict, intervention* and *military expedition* were frequently cited. Such inconsistencies could be attributable to the differences in the periods of inquiry and the choice of research methods. While I. Shevchenko et al. examined the period mainly predating the full-scale invasion, this paper followed the timeline from the commencement of the massive attack on February 24th to November of the current year. Also, in this paper, similar to the study

of P. Vrba, negative prosody prevailed in characterizing public attitude to the president of the Russian Federation [10]. Finally, one of the pivotal themes to emerge from this inquiry was the destitute circumstances of the Ukrainian civilians and representation of Russia and its politics as a victimizer, complying with the results of A. Kryzhanivska [7].

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study focused on a relatively small-scale analysis of the representation of war in Ukraine in the international press release. Corpus analysis methods were resorted to in order to provide a window into the typical narratives associated with the theme of warfare. By singling out the keywords in a specialized corpus constructed for this study, it was possible to expose the typical war discourses. The common themes transpiring from the keyword analysis and analysis of collocations were military intervention, actors/agents, implements, consequences, victims, description and attitudes, resistance, and economy. It was observed that the three most frequent lexemes used to refer to ongoing military aggression were *war, invasion*, and *conflict*. These lexemes were interrelated both paradigmatically and syntagmatically by sharing collocates.

Negative discourse prosody was found to characterize Russia and its top politician, who epitomized the principle causative of war in the prevalent number of instances in the target corpus. Direct negative representation illustrated the war in Ukraine and the general negative attitude of the public, as shown based on the analysis of collocates of *war*. Condemnation of aggression was realized through the lexical patterns related to the discussion of consequences and victims of military intervention. Frequent reference was also made to the devastating effect of war on the global economy realized in rich lexical choices.

Despite many significant insights yielded by the present research, it is not altogether exempt from researcher bias since social research and discourse interpretation, in particular, are inherently biased. Nevertheless, the attempts to base reasoning on the statistical measurements of lexis through corpus linguistics methodology in this investigation counteracted personal bias to a considerable extent. Finally, the possible venues for future research could include a comparison of the representation of the Russian-Ukrainian war by the media in different parts of the world.

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КОРПУСНИЙ АНАЛІЗ РЕПРЕЗЕНТУВАННЯ ВІЙНИ В УКРАЇНІ У МІЖНАРОДНІЙ ПРЕСІ

У статті проаналізовано мовні засоби репрезентування війни в Україні у міжнародних засобах масової інформації із застосуванням методів корпусної лінгвістики. Базою дослідження є укладений автором спеціалізований корпус англомовного міжнародного прес-релізу за період від 24 лютого по 1 листопада поточного року (1 018 971 слів). Аналіз здійснено із застосуванням кількісних і якісних методів дослідження, а саме методу ключових слів і колокацій за допомогою програмного забезпечення LancsBox, з подальшою контекстною інтерпретацією мовних одиниць. Аналіз ключових слів і колокацій уможливив виявлення основних наративів, представлених в англомовному медіа-дискурсі. З'ясовано, що основними темами, через призму яких здійснюється висвітлення й обговорення теми війни в Україні є наступні: військове втручання, суб'єкти, знаряддя, наслідки, жертви, опис і ставлення, протистояння та економіка. Виявлено, що найуживанішими лексемами реферування домену військового втручання є війна, вторгнення та конфлікт. Особливо багатими на лексичні засоби реалізації є наративи, пов'язані із вираженням ставлення до війни та її вплив на світову економіку. Обговорення війни та деяких з її суб'єктів здійснюється у ЗМІ з притаманною негативною дискурсивною просодією. Назагал, здійснене дослідження фіксує відображення суспільного ставлення до збройної агресії в Україні у висвітленні новин світовими медіа.

Ключові слова: *англомовні міжнародні медіа, війна, ключові слова, корпусна лінгвістика, теми, Україна.*

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