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## **CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF 'CIVIL SOCIETY' IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC DISCOURSE**

*The concept civil society has been known to specialists in the field of humanities since the time of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome and has been elaborated ever since as a philosophical, political and sociological term. Its significance varied. Much as it was important in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it yielded its leading position in the 1920s – 1960s. It started to become ever more popular in the 1980s onward as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of democratic transition of post-Soviet countries and the developing world. Nowadays, vibrant social movements are shaking up developed Western states and the concept of civil society that seemed to be well-crystallized continues evolving.*

*This research fills in the gap in cognitive linguistics by applying conceptual analysis to distinguish the ways of conceptualizing civil society in texts that belong to modern English-language academic discourse. The study reveals that conceptualization of civil society occurs according to the three patterns. Civil society may be presented in academic discourse as a part of social world where it forms a binary or a tripartite opposition to counterparts such as political society, traditional/barbarian state, business, family or clan. The second way of verbalizing the concept depicts civil society as a problem-solving tool and draws on metaphors. It may appear as a cure/panacea, a leverage over opponents, a school, a core of democracy or a state (Volunteerland). The third type of defining the concept lies in listing the bodies that fall into the category of organizations seen as civil society. Yet, by choosing the third, rather straightforward method to delve into the concept, scholars tend to introduce the list with the initially metaphorical "a web of/a network of". By doing so, the researchers focus on not only the organizations or groups that represent civil society but also suggest that these bodies maintain relations of interaction and interdependence.*

**Keywords:** civil society, concept, conceptual analysis, metaphor, discourse.

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**Problem statement and its relevance.** The concept 'civil society' originates from Ancient Greece and Rome and has been the focus of research by academia ever since. Like most concepts in the fields of philosophy, political science and sociology, 'civil society' is rather an abstract term. Its definitions depend largely on historical epochs, cultural specificity, and prevailing ideologies. 'Civil society' was the key philosophical and political issue in the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries but fell into a relative oblivion in the 1920s – 1960s (Kenny n.d.; Longley, 2022) and was revitalized in the 1980s as a result of the wave of the resistance against the collapsing political system in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The turbulent social dynamics in so-called 'third world/developing' countries kept the interest to the *civil society* issue aflame (Guo, 1998). A relatively recent case of the astounding power of social movements are the phenomenon of the Arab spring and revolutions in former Soviet republics such as Georgia (2003, 2023), Ukraine (2004, 2013–2014), Kyrgyzstan (2015), Armenia (2018), Kazakhstan (2022), etc. Methodological challenges to using Western theories in order to analyse the Arab spring events is discussed in (Mohamed, Mahdi, & Dabashi, 2019), while (Sprengel, 2020; Toukan, 2020) shed light on enacting revolutionary and activist movements in artistic initiatives. The consolidative role of *civil society* in post-Euromaidan Ukraine is considered by Burlyuk, Shapovalova and their colleagues in (Civil society in post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From revolution to consolidation, 2018). A similar perspective is offered by Broers in his study of post-revolutionary Georgia (Broers, 2005).

Nowadays, at the times of the global paradigm shift, 'developed' Western states present new data on *civil society* and, therefore, new opportunities for the study. For example, there is a dire need to consider the contribution of many social movements ranging from body positivity, abortion rights to #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Thus, the topicality of civil society as a subject-matter of scientific research persists and its related phenomena (for example, discursive features) have come into the focus of the recent works in political science, media studies, sociology and philosophy (see, for example, (Betz, 2021; Dawson, 2020; Koksvik, 2020; Salerno, & van de Warenburg, 2023; Wanner, & Inthorn, 2023)). Linguistics, however,

falls short of research into this vibrant and highly dynamic phenomenon, so the tentative initial analysis should concentrate primarily on the present-day interpretation of the concept of *civil society*.

**Theoretical framework and literature review.** Modern linguistic research operates within the anthropocentric paradigm, aspires to understand how human brain works and uses language as a source of data. The cognitive approach to language material is the key to this end. The term 'concept' is essential to cognitive linguistics and is defined as an informational cognitive structure of human consciousness incorporated in collective or individual conceptual system. Selivanova suggests classifying concepts along a number of criteria, namely (1) according to a conceptualization type (generalized sensory-visual images, schemata, concepts as an aggregate of essential features and frames); (2) according to functions of concepts in consciousness (mental, cultural, ideological, mythological, philosophical); (3) according to their conceptualization subject (universal or culture-bound); (4) according to their conceptualization object (anthropoconcepts, artifacts, nature concepts, cultural, ideological and emotional concepts); (5) according to their volume (standard, specific, encyclopedic and 'null' concepts) and their information quality (notional-logical, imaginative, paradoxical) (Selivanova, 2011, p. 297–298).

Bohomolov, in turn, puts forward a comprehensive definition of *concept* by interpreting it as clusters of meanings that result from categorizing (conceptualizing) and function as a means to make sense of socially significant everyday phenomena, a means of forming and transmitting behaviour patterns that differ in terms of their types and complexity. The researcher adds that concepts participate in intricate semantic relations and, by doing this, form a conceptual structure of a certain discourse (Bohomolov, 2018, p. 20).

Conceptual analysis helps to uncover information embedded in its verbalizer. Thus, the scope of conceptual analysis embraces meanings expressed by lexemes and collocations that refer to the concept. The structure and content of a concept may be revealed by looking into dictionary definitions and contextual usage of language units that represent (verbalize) the concept. A concept is usually verbalized by a number of linguistic devices, and each of them

conveys only a part of the concept's semantic volume. Hence, it is the analysis of a set of verbalizers that enables linguists to obtain a comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding of a concept as well as the pattern of its arrangement. Yet, these features embed the concept in thinking activity and activate other conceptual peculiarities delivered by a lexeme. These implicit, potential or associative traits are triggered by specific contexts.

Conceptual analysis is consistently and widely applied to political discourse at large (Sokolovska, n.d.; Yakovliev, 2020a; Yakovliev, 2020b) and in this case researchers either outline the procedure required to carry out contextual analysis of political discourse, or focus on a particular concept and look into its verbalizers and structure. Thus, the CONFLICT concept is analysed in (Zankovska, 2013); the WAR conflict is examined in Ukrainian political discourse by (Zinevich, & Krasavina, 2020); Pyliachyk and Trotsenko focus on the EUROPEAN UNION concept in English discourse (Pyliachyk, & Trotsenko, 2020), while Kalishchuk relies on political discourse to look into the DEMOCRACY concept (Kalishchuk, 2009).

As *civil society* as a modern philosophical and sociological term may be traced back to the Enlightenment, its evolution has been researched rather profoundly within the tradition of Western academia. Since Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, Ukrainian academic community has also been showing interest in *civil society* – both as a term and a phenomenon (Martsikhiv, & Horbachova, 2021; Identifying the Discourse of Hatred as Part of Resilience Policy, 2023). However, the CIVIL SOCIETY concept has not yet been studied by linguists, though, as the further research shows, it is the central concept for modern democracy.

**The objective of the research** is to approach the concept of 'civil society' from the linguistic viewpoint and apply conceptual analysis to its definitions and interpretations picked up from works on *civil society* by English-speaking philosophers, political and social scientists.

To achieve the objective, several **tasks** should be fulfilled:

1. to explore the previous research into the theory of civil society;
2. to create a sample of definitions of civil societies provided in academic discourse;
3. to analyse the sample and to use conceptual

analysis to classify the definitions; 4. to describe linguistic devices used to verbalize the concept of civil society.

**Research results.** The sample of the research consists of 17 academic texts that define and further discuss the term *civil society*. The passages with the definitions suggest that scholars conceptualize *civil society* in three modes:

(1) it is positioned as a member of dichotomy or trichotomy within the category *social world*

(2) it is explained metaphorically and the metaphors are selected to highlight functions performed by *civil society*

(3) it is exemplified rather than defined by listing certain types of organizations.

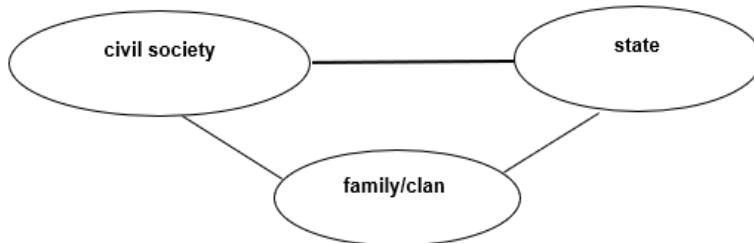
The first, **opposition-based mode** presents *civil society* as a member of binary or tripartite opposition. The dichotomies may be

(a) *civil society* vs *political society*, the point of view associated with Hegel, Montesquieu, Gramsci and Tocqueville and cited in (Guo, 1998; Kenny, n.d.; Longley, 2022; Martsikhiv, & Horbachova, 2021, p. 185)

(b) *civil society* vs *barbarian/traditional society* or *despotic state*, the dichotomy distinguished by Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, e.g., Aristotle and Cicero (Kelly, n.d.; Longley, 2022), and challenged for its "ideological gloss" by modern proponents of post-colonialism (Douzinas, 2007, p. 7; Mohamed, Mahdi, & Dabashi, 2019)

The trichotomies are represented by the two models:

(a) *civil society* vs *state* vs *family/clan* (see Figure 1): the trichotomy considered "unique and desirable" by the West (Kenny, n.d.)



**Fig. 1**

(b) "*the third sector*" (civil society) vs *the public sector* (state) vs *the private sector* (business) (Figure 2): the trichotomy that implies that civil society "*has the power to influence the actions of elected policymakers and businesses*" (Longley, 2022; Martsikhiv, & Horbachova, 2021, p. 190).

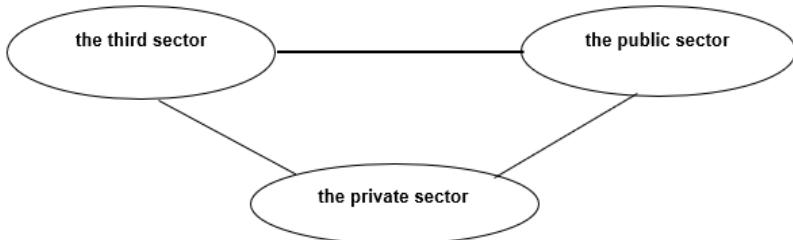


Fig. 2

As one may see, delving into the conceptualization of civil society informs of researchers' views on the *social world* as well as uncovers researchers' assumptions and, at times, biases of cultural and ideological nature, since nomination of an opposition member may contain lexemes negatively connoted for English speakers such as *barbarian*, *traditional*, *despotic*, *clan*. The negative connotations arise from the implied connection with *primitive* or *traditionalist* (in other words, *regressive* and *backward*) communities that are contrasted with innovative, civilized modern societies.

The **metaphor-based representation** of *civil society*, despite its seeming diversity, may be reduced to three types.

The first of these views *civil society* as a **problem-solving tool**. The problems may be figuratively presented as medical/health issues and *civil society* is a cure. The quotes below contain the examples:

... *civil society has moved to the centre stage of Western political debate, assuming the character of both the diagnosis for and the solution to the various malaises of Western society...* (Kenny, n.d.)

... *many authors, politicians, and public authorities keen to find solutions to some of the different kinds of problems facing developing countries seized upon civil society as a kind of panacea.* (Longley, 2022)

The "*Swiss Army knife*" metaphor also delivers the idea of problem-solving coupled with the that of versatility of these problems, especially when dealing with issues that hinder democratic transformations in developing countries:

... many authors, politicians, and public authorities came to view civil society as a sort of "*Swiss Army knife*" for fixing the many problems facing developing countries.  
(Longley, 2022)

There are cases when *civil society* is described as a two-edged sword. For example, it may perform functions of either **a leverage over** dominating powers (and here one means the ruling class, authorities, or a government) or **a leverage of** governments. According to Gellner, *civil society* is "*a force* that empowers democracy, human rights and liberty" (Gellner, 1994, p. 35) or, as Keane puts it, "**the rallying cry and deadly weapon**" for ordinary people to counter and defend themselves against dominating powers (Keane, 2020). Simultaneously, Foucault sees *civil society* as "**a concept of government technology**" (Foucault, 2008, p. 296) and, therefore, includes authorities into the circle of actors siding with *civil society*.

From the point of view of Fukuyama, who calls *civil society* "**schools of citizenship** where individuals learned the habits of co-operation that would eventually carry over into public life" (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 11), *civil society* performs the functions of an educational tool that teaches the ways of citizenship, i.e., responsible social and political behaviour.

The Swiss-Army-knife quote as well as Fukuyama's metaphor explicates the key peculiarity ascribed to *civil society* in modern academic discourse: it is always pointed out as "**a conceptual mainstay of academic thinking about democratic transitions and a familiar part of the discourse of global institutions, leading nongovernmental organizations, and Western governments**" (Longley, 2022). The adjective *democratic* with its positive connotations for Western audiences implies *progressive* when it modifies the noun *transitions*. The same positive evaluation characterizes the adjectives *global*, *leading* and *Western*, which acquire the connotation of *civilized* and *desired* in this context. Thus, one returns back to the plain dichotomy "*civil society* vs *barbarian*

*society*", only put in a more delicate and sophisticated way. It is *civil society* that is essential to a "*healthy*", "*robust*" democracy (Longley, 2022). Since English-speaking media and West-based organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, etc. are currently dominating communicative space, *civil society* has become "*a buzzword*" (Keane, 2020).

The metaphorical nomination of *civil society* as *Volunteerland* is meant to underline that though *civil society* is made up of NGOs, its operating expenditures are believed to be \$2.2 trillion, comparable with the gross domestic product of an affluent country. The metaphor is verbalized by the compound coinage *volunteer + land* where *land* stands for *country/state* and implies that *civil society* forms a state of its own employing about 54 mln full-time equivalent workers and disposing of a global volunteer workforce of over 350 million people (Longley, 2022).

The **third group** of texts contains those definitions that rely primarily on listing the types of organizations that are commonly included in *civil society*. The list may be given immediately:

*Civil society refers to a wide variety of communities and groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations that function outside of government to provide support and advocacy for certain people or issues in society* (Longley, 2022).

*... civil society therefore includes voluntary associations and firms and other corporate bodies.*  
(A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations, 2018).

However, definitions of this type tend to combine straightforwardness with a metaphoric touch because the list of organizations may be preceded by the word *network* or *web*, both lexemes suggesting that these organizations are interdependent and interconnected. Thus, *civil society* may be defined as "*a web of autonomous associations independent of the state*" (Klingman, 1990, p. 420) or as "*a dense network of groups, communities, networks, and ties that stand between the individual and the modern state*" (Kenny, n.d.).

**Conclusions and further research.** The analysis of literature devoted to *civil society* in modern scientific research reveals that it is central to the humanities, namely to political studies, media studies, philosophy and cultural studies. Scholars within these fields focus on the multiple facets of this phenomenon. Yet, despite vibrant development of media, socio-, cognitive and political linguistics, this concept has not yet been embraced linguistically.

Applying conceptual analysis to verbalizations of *civil society* in academic texts enables to distinguish between three patterns of its conceptualization. The first pattern is rooted in the oppositional method and is represented by two binary and two tripartite oppositions that break down *social world* into two (political society or barbarian/traditional or despotic state) or three spheres (state – family/clan or the public sector – the private sector) respectively. Civil society in this case is positively connoted in the opposition where its alternatives contain adjectives with negative connotations.

The second way of conceptualizing *civil society* is metaphorical, where most metaphors deliver the idea of instrumentality and functionality. Here *civil society* is viewed as a problem-solving tool: it may be a cure for an illness, it may be a leverage over opponents, and the core of Western democratic system. Yet, the *Volunteerland* metaphor suggests that some aspects of *civil society* turn it into a state of its own kind because it disposes of a significant budget and people (employees and millions of volunteers).

Academic texts also define *civil society* by providing lists of organizations and groups that belong to this category. Yet, these 'hands-on' definitions are often metaphorical, and manifested via the lexemes *web* and *network*. They verbalize the idea that organizations within *civil society* are not isolated but, on the contrary, interact and form a certain structure.

The study into linguistic aspects of *civil society* is promising because there are many research gaps. The concept may be studied from the point of view of its frame structure and vocabulary used to verbalize the slots in political, media and academic discourses. Numerous modern social movements that actualize *civil society* develop their own jargon that offer rich material for linguistic research. In addition, there is much to observe in cultural

interpretations and, consequently, discursive features of *civil society* representations across the English-speaking communities that currently belong either to the democratic West or the Global South.

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**КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ТЕРМІНА  
*CIVIL SOCIETY (ГРОМАДЯНСЬКЕ СУСПІЛЬСТВО)*  
В АНГЛОМОВНОМУ АКАДЕМІЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ**

*Концепт civil society (громадянське суспільство) відомий спеціалістам в гуманітарних науках з часів Стародавньої Греції та Старо-*

давнього Риму та детально розроблювався як філософський, політичний та соціологічний термін. У різні часи його значущість була різною. Він був надзвичайно важливим у XVIII та XIX століттях, проте втратив своє провідне значення у 20-их – 60-их роках XX століття. Починаючи з 1980-их, цей термін продовжує набувати популярності через крах Радянського Союзу та демократичні зміни у пострадянських країнах і в країнах, що розвиваються. Сьогодні бурхливі соціальні рухи стрясають розвинуті західні країни і концепт *civil society*, який, здавалось, вже викристалізувався, продовжує еволюціонувати.

Ця стаття є спробою заповнити прогалини в когнітивній лінгвістиці шляхом застосування концептуального аналізу задля викремлення способів концептуалізації *civil society* в текстах, що належать до сучасного англомовного академічного дискурсу. Результати дослідження вказують на те, що концептуалізація *civil society* відбувається за трьома патернами. Так, *civil society* може презентуватися в академічному дискурсі як частина соціального світу (social world), у якому цей концепт формує бінарну або потрійну опозицію до таких концептів, як *political society*, *traditional/barbarian state*, *business*, *family* або *clan*. Другим шляхом вербалізації обраного концепту, який представляє *civil society* як інструмент розв'язання проблем, ґрунтуються на метафорах. *Civil society* може бути ліками (cure, panacea), важелем (leverage) вlivу на опонентів, школою (school), серцевиною (sore) демократії або навіть державою (Volunteerland). Третій шлях концептуалізації полягає у перелічуванні організацій, які вважаються складниками *civil society*. Однак обираючи третій, достатньо предметний спосіб концептуалізації, вчені часто починають перелік початковою метафоризованою лексемою "a web of/a network of", за допомогою якої автори вказують не лише на організації чи групи, які актуалізують концепт *civil society*, але також імпліцитно стверджують, що ці установи знаходяться у процесі взаємодії та взаємозалежності.

**Ключові слова:** *civil society*/громадянське суспільство, концепт, концептуальний аналіз, метафора, дискурс.