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## EVALUATIVE POTENTIAL OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER ASYMMETRY IN UKRAINIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

Дослідження має на меті визначити особливості граматичної гендерної асиметрії в сучасній українській мові на матеріалі текстів суспільно-політичної тематики задля виділення чинників, що сприяють вираженню певних прагматичних імплікованих смислів, а також задля виявлення самих цих смислів.

Досягнення поставленої мети передбачає застосування *методів* інтерактивного моделювання, контекстуального, інтерпретаційного та структурного аналізу.

Сучасна дискусія щодо соціально-політичних питань має тенденцію до вираження суб'єктивної думки та емоційного сприйняття фактів дійсності, що уможливорює чітку ідентифікацію суб'єктів комунікації і віднесення до груп «ми» / «вони». У статті аналізується прагматичний потенціал порушень норм у кореферентних ланцюжках (анафорична, катафорична та екзофорична референції) шляхом використання граматичних транспозицій в українському суспільно-політичному дискурсі. Аналіз доводить, що маскуліно-фемінні / нейтральні трансформації призводять до комунікативних імплікацій з різними прагматичними наслідками. Розуміння цих значень залежить від двох чинників: володіння комунікантами системним потенціалом української мови, а також від міри зануреності комунікантів у соціально-політичну проблематику українського суспільства; як наслідок, відбувається маркування референтів як аксіологічно своїх чи чужих.

Узагальнюючи, можна стверджувати, що найбільш ефективною у вираженні оцінки є транспозиція жіночого / чоловічого і середнього роду, оскільки таким чином утворюється опозиція до традиційної гендерної пари; середній рід протистоїть опозиції чоловічий / жіночий і передає широкий спектр комунікативних значень. Подібним до середнього є загальний рід, багате джерело лексичних конотацій і граматично гнучких форм. Саме соціально-політичний дискурс є полем для актуалізації дискурсивно пов'язаних значень середнього роду: тут реалізується комунікативно-прагматичне значення несхвалення / осуду референта, що супроводжується різними емоційними відтінками та прихованою аргументацією несхвалення. Прагматичним тригером створення цього оцінного значення є ідеологічне підґрунтя (референт – трус, неук, запроданець тощо). Граматичні транспозиції роду в межах кореферентних ланцюжків – зокрема частотність їхнього вживання та прагматичне навантаження іменних форм середнього роду і займенника *воно* – можна розглядати як маркер сучасної української комунікації в суспільно-політичному дискурсі.

*Ключові слова:* прагматичний потенціал, граматична транспозиція, середній рід, кореферентний ланцюжок, займенник *воно*, оцінка, аксіологія, соціально-політичний дискурс.

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## Introduction

M. Halliday wrote, 'Grammar is a resource for meaning, the critical functioning semiotic using which we pursue our everyday life. <...> A grammar is a theory of human experience' [Halliday, 2002, pp. 369–370]. These words are the motto of much contemporary **linguistic-pragmatic** research, where scholars aim to go beyond the systemic-structuralist paradigm and reveal the hidden potential of grammatical / lexical-grammatical categories in various communicative contexts.

Evaluation is the strongest representative of the pragmatic meaning of linguistic units or phenomena; it is a complex cognitive process when a subject's conscience obtains and processes information about the outer world. Given this, evaluation is regarded as a logical-philosophical, cognitive, linguistic and communicative category that involves universal (psychological) and subjective (socio-cultural and individual) reasoning. Communicative-pragmatic, cognitive and linguistic aspects of evaluating various phenomena reflect the national particularity of world perception; the category of evaluation acquires importance in its linguistic realisation as the carrier of the axiological component of national culture. The axiology of a nation or any social stratum or group is the basis of its identity and represents the values of its members; axiology may constitute a universal system of values of people in general and vary over time with socio-political changes in society. Both universal and variable values are reflected in language at **different levels**: lexical (the most sensitive to the needs of the speaker) and grammatical (the least variable and depending on the systemic properties of grammatical elements and the flexibility of a particular language system).

G. Corbett says, "Gender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories. ... One of its attractions for linguists is that there are interesting aspects of the study of gender in each of the core areas of linguistics" [Corbett, 1991, p. 1]. This study focuses on providing a linguistic-pragmatic view of grammatical gender asymmetry in contemporary Ukrainian texts addressing socio-political issues. The research aims to reveal the sensitivity of grammatical gender transpositions (masculine/feminine → neuter) to the discursive specifics (socio-political discourse) and extra-linguistic factors, and clarify the set of senses actualised in this discourse through transposed gender forms. The aim is motivated by the topicality of the linguistic-pragmatic studies of modern language in a time of drastic socio-political changes and war.

The current state of research in this field in the Ukrainian language shows an imbalance in favour of the functional-semantic and cognitive aspects of expressing evaluation at the lexical [Arkhanhelska, 2007; Krasnobaieva-Chorna, 2016; Kuznetsova, 2007] and grammatical [Oleksenko, 2018] levels; however, the pragmatic potential of grammatical means has been analysed only sporadically. A comprehensive **investigation has been conducted by A. Zahnitko, who suggests the notion of 'мовносоціумна грамати́ка'** ['linguo-social grammar'], which 'is based on the same categorial apparatus that theoretical grammar has developed with only one difference crucial for analysing dynamic shifts in the content of grammatical forms: their realisation in colloquial and spontaneous speech, categorial parameters of the discourse, etc.' [Zahnitko, 2018, p. 17]. A subsequent work by O. Khaliman [Khaliman, 2019] presents a detailed analysis of the evaluative potential of Ukrainian grammatical forms, the gender of nouns in particular. The authors mentioned above scrutinise the axiological specificity of various grammatical forms and paradigms; however, the works do not specify the genres and types of discourse where the axiologically marked grammatical forms are most effective or help reveal the most urgent societal need to focus attention on the change of values or their acuteness.

In contrast, European linguists pay close attention to various aspects of linguistic gender representation and transposition driven by specific extra-linguistic factors, which increases the topicality and effectiveness of a linguistic-pragmatic view on the problem, with the intentional concentration on the discursive specificity of the texts. For example, gender violations and their pragmatic effect became the subject of investigation by K. Christopoulou, G. Xydopoulos, and A. Tsangalidis [2022], M. Dunn [2015], L. Ganushchak, R. Verdonschot and N. Schiller [2011], P. Hegarty [2014], H. Motschenbacher [2010], among others. The number of papers published in the past decade makes the relevance of this research apparent and exposes the lack of such studies in Ukraine.

The axiological aspect of human communication means that communicants mark what is good or bad in their system of values. These markers can be expressed explicitly (e.g., through

the lexemes *friend / enemy*) or implied or hidden in the linguistic or extra-linguistic context. The hypothesis is that the discursive specificity of texts on socio-political issues is a venue for authors' cognitive and emotional feedback to sensitive problems; thus, authorial intention and discourse pragmatics exploit the grammatical potential of the Ukrainian language and allow for grammatical gender violations; we believe that social and mass media texts on political issues provide the necessary pragmatic freedom for these intentional breaches and grammatical asymmetry within a syntagma; moreover, the asymmetry carries stable meanings understandable for readers although it requires keeping up with the political events and up-to-date linguistic tendencies within a group of a specific identity because swift changes in socio-political life impede the communicative effect of non-standard grammatical use.

People belonging to different social or national groups with distinct identities define the boundaries of 'their' space, identifying 'us' and 'them'. The opposition 'we' – 'they' (or 'the self' – 'the other') is the subject of research in contemporary discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, pragmatics and other related humanities. 'Otherness' refers to the dominant perception of 'them' if it opposes the globalised worldview, which does not accept geographical, political or cultural borders. It is a concept that signifies the perception of a group or individual as different or alien. A lack of security, tolerance or understanding multiplies uncertainty and fosters a 'crisis mentality' or 'moral panic' [McLuhan, 1994; Cohen, 2011; Esses et al., 2013]; in this mental state, **people tend to label representatives of 'the other' side in attempts to demarcate the boundaries of 'our' and 'their' spaces.**

Speakers usually identify themselves in arguments on socio-political issues, where they are often prone to subjective evaluation and emotional perception employing various expressive linguistic means, including insults [Molek-Kozakowska, 2011] and hate speech [Kopytowska et al., 2015; Zhabotynskaya, 2015]. The linguistic interpretation of evaluation is essential for performing cognitive and communicative functions and serves as a potential expressive and cumulative resource. Evaluation allows for distinguishing and identifying an object as 'good' or 'bad' in the speaker's logic and, consequently, in the wording of their point of view [Volf, 2002]. However, the opposition 'we' – 'they' results from cognitive operations that reflect the perception of the swiftly changing extra-linguistic factors.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. What evaluative pragmatic potential does the grammatical category of gender in the Ukrainian language possess?
2. Which implicit communicative meanings does the violation of the categorial grammatical norm actualise in social and mass media texts on socio-political issues in modern Ukraine (specifically, switches between masculine/feminine and neuter/common gender in co-referential pairs)?
3. What are the pragmatic triggers of these meanings in the modern socio-political environment?

The structure of the paper will follow the posed questions and prove the hypothesis gradually.

## Methodology

Since gender switch in Ukrainian grammar is non-systemic, the data consists of rare cases manually selected **from online media and social media with regard to the linguistic (which variations are a norm for the Ukrainian language system and which are deviant) and extra-linguistic factors** (such as the political situation, the state of the social opinion, etc.). A computerised corpus-based approach is not feasible because it cannot trace the sporadic and unpredictable use of variable grammatical forms. Moreover, modern Ukrainian corpora software is still developing for the possibility of identifying co-referential pairs in texts. The study is qualitative rather than quantitative and views this grammatical phenomenon from multiple perspectives within the bounds of linguistic pragmatics using:

- the contextual-interpretative method to define the pragmatic aim of the author concerning the socio-political topic of the text;
- interactive modelling to define and generalise the emotional elements of the meaning created and to hypothesise on the possible systemic nature of this means;

- structural analysis to identify the linguistic means that help objectivise the pragmatic intention.

In this research, we analyse the phenomenon of gender form asymmetry in co-referential pairs within syntagmas under the influence of context in the process of transposition – using a grammatical form in a non-standard grammatical context. When transposed, the grammatical form retains its primary grammatical meaning, even though it is modified, complicated and enriched with new meanings [Vykhovanets, 1998].

### Theoretical background

It is common knowledge that the noun system of the Ukrainian language actualises its lexico-grammatical meaning in the paradigm of syncretic categorial forms of gender, number, and case. The category of gender, on the one hand, is highly systemic and formal; on the other hand, formal-grammatical and semantic-grammatical contents sometimes disagree. ‘Social needs influence the sex opposition actualisation: they reflect the functional status of individuals of feminine/masculine genders; this is linked to the category of gender’ [Zahnitko, 2018, p. 22]. A. Zahnitko, first, sees the flexibility of the Ukrainian language in morpho-derivational nominations. The language data we analysed demonstrate that in neutral or formal contexts, regardless of the sex of the referent, masculine forms tend to appear: ‘The ability of a masculine gender morphological form to denote a person in general and be the means of nomination for persons of masculine gender in specific communicative situations is the proof of their non-markedness’ [Zahnitko, 2018, p. 23]:

(1) *Гонтарева* (Fem) ... *соратник* (Masc.) *Президента Порошенка* [Hontareva (Fem) ... a close ally (Masc.) of President Poroshenko]<sup>1</sup> [Romaniuk et al., 2019];

(2) *Народного депутата* (Masc.) *України, Героя* (Masc.) *України Надію Савченко* (Fem.) *внесли в базу широко відомого сайту “Миротворець”, де її підписали, як “Зрадник* (Masc.) *батьківщини. Пособник* (Masc.) *терористів” [People’s Deputy of Ukraine (Masc.) and Hero of Ukraine (Masc.), Nadiya Savchenko (Fem.), was added to the database of the widely known website “Myrotvorets”, where she was labelled as a “Traitor (Masc.) to the Motherland. Accomplice (Masc.) of terrorists”] [Korz, 2018].*

The choice of masculine-gender lexemes in examples (1) and (2) marks the formal, official style of these texts because *соратниця, депутатка, героїня, зрадниця, пособниця* (feminine derivative variants) are still struggling for their equal treatment in modern normative Ukrainian usage. However, they are no longer considered deviant.

Deviations from the norm and their communicative potential depend upon the language system potential; non-characteristic use of a grammatical form carries implicit pragmatic information. However, this pragmatic information should be intentionally created and adequately decoded. Otherwise, communication fails, and this grammatical deviation remains ‘a mistake’. These implications may appear deliberately or in the process of repetitive use of this form in speech in specific communicative situations: ‘multiple, repetitive use of a word in a typical communicative situation makes the usual fixation of pragmatic information in the word possible’ [Aznaurova, 2010, p. 38]. A grammatical system can release its potential and model evaluative patterns using grammatical contrast or grammatically variable forms, etc. [Remchukova, 2016, pp. 32–34].

If a grammatical form is transposed in one of the patterns, it starts performing an unusual function and expands its semantic, functional, and pragmatic capacities. G. Zeldovich [2012] remarks that actual use is far richer and more unpredictable than a semantic invariant – a fact that is self-evident in grammar. Thus, a morphological unit starts expressing a new pragmatic sense.

a) Evaluative potential of the grammatical category of gender in the Ukrainian language

Researchers agree that grammar and lexical semantics are interrelated, and it is challenging to single out and study purely grammatical evaluative means; another reason is that the con-

<sup>1</sup> *Валерія Гонтарева* [Valeriia Gontariova], the Chairwoman of the National Bank of Ukraine in 2014–2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Надія Савченко* [Nadiya Savchenko] is a Ukrainian politician and former Army aviation pilot in the Ukrainian Ground Forces, an MP in the 8th Parliament of Ukraine.

text and grammatical meanings of other elements in the syntagma influence the grammatical semantics of an element. Studying the communicative-pragmatic potential of grammatical categories or single grammatical forms requires considering the broad national-cultural-specific background and narrow situational reasoning behind the use of this form. In cases of shaping a social or national group identity, background knowledge – embedded in national consciousness, plays an important role and determines the world perception and axiology of the identity's carriers [Tarasova, 1999]. This determination helps form archetypes (a concept by Carl Jung) that make up the system of the collective unconscious. Accordingly, researchers look for the archetypes of a culture and the ways they are realised in a language. Traditional gender oppositional associations, as defined by Isabelle de Courtivron and Elaine Marks, mark everything masculine as positive and hierarchically higher, active, cultural and logical. In contrast, everything feminine is negative, hierarchically lower, passive, natural, sensual and emotional [Courtivron, Marks, 1981]. The Ukrainian lingual culture also follows this trend regarding gender oppositions. O. Taranenko mentions that social distinctions reflected implicitly in word forms are secondary and follow the primary oppositions of person / non-person, animate/inanimate object, and gender opposition. He develops this idea with a remark worth noting for the current research: he counterposes, first, the masculine and the feminine, and second, the adult and the non-adult or the young (new). Thus, the neuter-gender member of the grammatical opposition stands apart from the other two and needs special attention in the analysis.

#### b) Transposition to neuter gender

The evaluative potential of neuter gender is marked by its apparent, naturally motivated reference to objects without gender or with no gender distinctions. As stylistic morphology explains, the use of neuter-gender forms instead of masculine or feminine ones expresses irony, disdain, or sarcasm towards the referent, on the one hand; on the other hand, it may also express care, delight, sympathy, or pity.

The Ukrainian language possesses a set of neuter-gender lexemes that denote children and are used in parallel with masculine or feminine semantic variants (e.g., *дитина* [a child] (Fem.) – *дитя* [a child] (Neut.); *хлопець* [a boy] (Masc.) – *хлоп'я* [a boy] (Neut.); *заяць* [a rabbit] (Masc.) – *зайча* [a rabbit/a bunny] (Neut.), etc. The former variants are stylistically neutral; the latter expresses care and delight or mark the opposition 'adult/child' [Taranenko, 1989]. Negative evaluation appears when sex indefiniteness motivates the actualisation of diminutive, generalising, collective and other similar meanings [Nazarenko, 2009]; the idea of a primitive soul, undeveloped morally and emotionally [Ponomariv, 2000]; or the concept of biological or social immaturity [Taranenko, 1989]. In such cases, either the personal pronoun *вона* is used or elliptical constructions with neuter-gender forms of the dependent or coordinated elements.

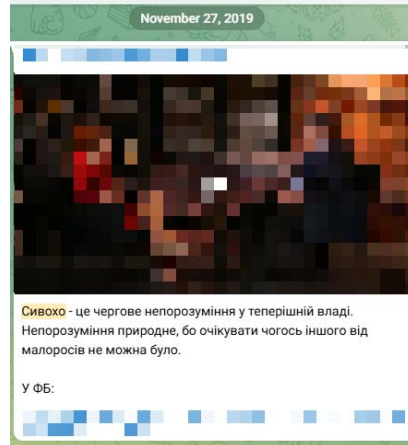
The grammatical category of gender in the Ukrainian language is inseparable from the semantic content of lexemes. This fact, together with the flexibility of derivative grammatical forms and the syntactic correlation of elements, create a system of variable forms used in different contexts. The evaluative potential of gender forms is revealed in the opposition 'masculine' – 'feminine' and 'masculine/feminine' – 'neuter'. O. Khaliman concludes that the latter transposition actualises the senses of 'respect, fondness, sympathy, etc.' [Khaliman, 2019, p. 143], "disdain, hate, or even satire and sarcasm" [Khaliman, 2019, p. 145], biological immaturity [Khaliman, 2019, p. 147]. She also remarks that the 'masculine/feminine' – 'neuter' gender transposition serves as a means of euphemisation and expresses rather irony than sarcasm or direct negative evaluation [Khaliman, 2019, p. 155]. The transposition of grammatical forms actualises evaluative connotations rooted in the traditional cultural perception of what is good or bad for a man, a woman, an adult, or a child. Accordingly, the pragmatic potential of gender forms, as we will show later, is triggered by actions or states the referent is involved in or associated within a particular socio-political situation.

## Results

The research material is primarily social media or other resources where speakers do not have restrictions on the commentaries they make; however, it requires tact and thoughtful presentation when analysed. Before presenting the results of the analysis, it should be stated that in accordance with the ethical standards of the journal, the names of politicians or other people or

groups of people are not mentioned if the language of the quotation reveals any prejudice or reflects any other hateful attitudes toward the referent(s).

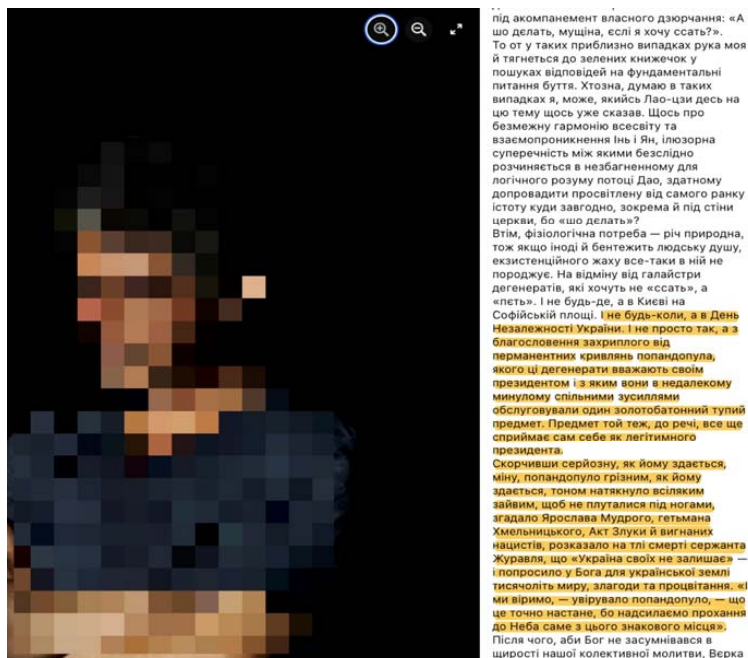
Neuter-gender transpositions are primarily based on the logical non-equivalence of the sex of the referent and the grammatical gender of the name it is referred to in the predicative part of the sentence. Usually, these are units with a negative connotation of the lexical meaning, e.g., *непорозуміння* (Neut.):



(3) *Сергій* (Masc.) *Сивохо* – це ще одне *непорозуміння* (Neut./Com.) в нашій теперішній владі [Serhiy Syvokho (Masc.) is yet another *misstep* (Neut./Com.) in our current government]<sup>3</sup>.

In (3), the word *непорозуміння* is used metaphorically, meaning the person who looks strange in a particular social position and performs unusual functions.

Neuter and common gender grammatical transpositions and intentional avoidance of masculine gender forms allow the strengthening of particular pragmatic meanings in (4):



<sup>3</sup> *Сергій Сивохо* [Serhiy Syvokho], a comedian and a friend of Zelensky's, has been appointed as an Advisor to the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council on Donbas reintegration and reconstruction.

(4) <...> з благословення захриплого від перманентних кривлянь **попандопула**<sup>4</sup> (Com.), якого ці дегенерати вважають своїм президентом і з яким вони в недалекому минулому спільними зусиллями обслуговували один золотобатонний тупий предмет<sup>5</sup>. <...> Скорчивши серйозну, як йому здається, міну, **попандопуло** грізним, як йому здається, тоном **натягнуло** (Neut.) <...>, **згадало** (Neut.) <...>, **розказало** (Neut.) <...> – і **попросило** (Neut.) у Бога <...>. “І ми віримо, – **увірувало попандопуло** <...>” [<...> with the blessing of the hoarse **popandopulo** (Com.), worn out from constant grimacing, whom these degenerates consider their president and with whom, not so long ago, they jointly served a golden-loaf-like dumb object. <...> Pulling a serious face, as he believes, **popandopulo** (Neut.) **hinted** (Neut.) <...>, **recalled** (Neut.) <...>, **told** (Neut.) <...> – and **asked** (Neut.) God <...>. “And we believe,” **popandopulo believed** (Neut.) <...>].

In Ukrainian, names of foreign origin ending in *-o* are homonymous with neuter-gender nouns. In the nominative case, feminine and masculine forms are indistinguishable unless they collocate with adjectives or past tense verbs. In (4), the cultural and semantic connotation of the noun *попандопуло*, implying contempt, is strengthened by neuter-gender forms of past tense verbs. However, its reference to the object of masculine sex is made with the help of the noun *президент*.

The meanings ‘to lie’ and ‘to be afraid’ are the keynotes of the opponents’ contempt and the motives of their pragmatic intentions. They make the pronoun *воно* the discursive-grammatical marker of negative evaluation of the referent in the socio-political discourse within a cataphoric referential chain:



(5) [It (Neut.) is afraid. [President] (Masc.) has started openly threatening strikes on sensitive targets in Western countries].

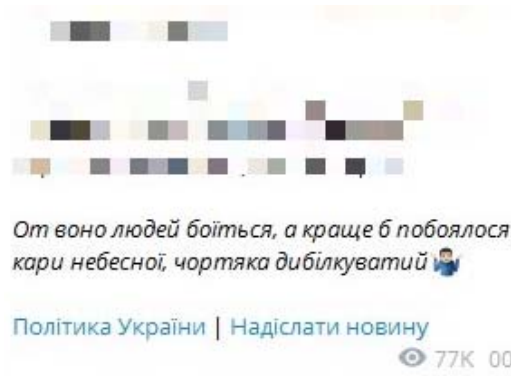
The accusation of the cowardice of the President has become one of the trends since February 24, 2022, and one of the keynotes of comments to texts in online media. (5) is one of the headlines in NV, mass media that is viewed as a quality paper; consequentially, it practices high

<sup>4</sup> *Попандопуло* [Popandopulo] is a character in a Soviet musical comedy (“Wedding in Malinovka”) about the struggle between the Red Army and various paramilitary groups in the south of Ukraine in 1919. The character is a merry drunkard who sings, dances, flirts with women, and has no ideological stamina; his purpose is to share the stolen property with a profit to himself. A collective character of all the crooks of the Civil War (1919 – 1920).

<sup>5</sup> About Viktor Yanukovich, the 4th president of Ukraine, who fled the country in 2014 after the Maidan protests. Later, a gold loaf was found in his mansion; this phrase has become a meme in Ukrainian culture.

journalistic standards and avoids emotional or stylistically coloured language. It might be for this reason that the editors of the issue changed the headline and took away the *воно*-phrase if you follow the link now (see the Sources).

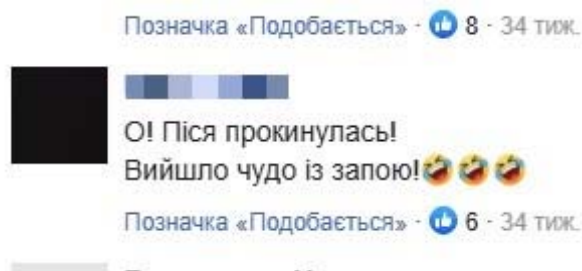
The pragmatic potential of the neuter gender, the pronoun *воно*, in particular, allows for revealing a set of low moral standards of the opponent – a complicated mixture of cowardice, lack of mental abilities, extreme religiosity, and malice. These senses are reinforced by the lexical items that form the referential chain:



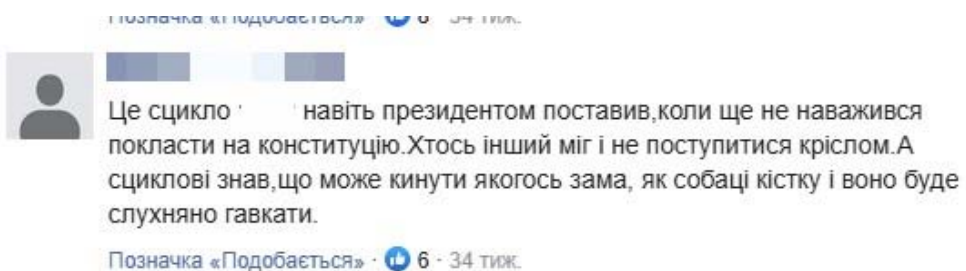
(6) [**It's** (Neut.) afraid of people, but **it would be better off fearing** (Neut.) divine punishment, that **dim-witted devil** (Masc.)].

The pragmatic meaning of 'disapproval and scorn' is successively actualised in social media and comments to mass media texts since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion. In (6), the name of the aggressor is decapitalised, as well as the names of significant 'Russian world' objects – the Kremlin and the FSS.

The comments to the aggressive statements of another Russian politician are even more scornful and pitiless.



(7) [Wow! The pussy has woken up! [female genitalia] (Fem.+Diminutive) **The prodigy came out** (Neut./Com.) of a drinking binge! 😊😊😊]



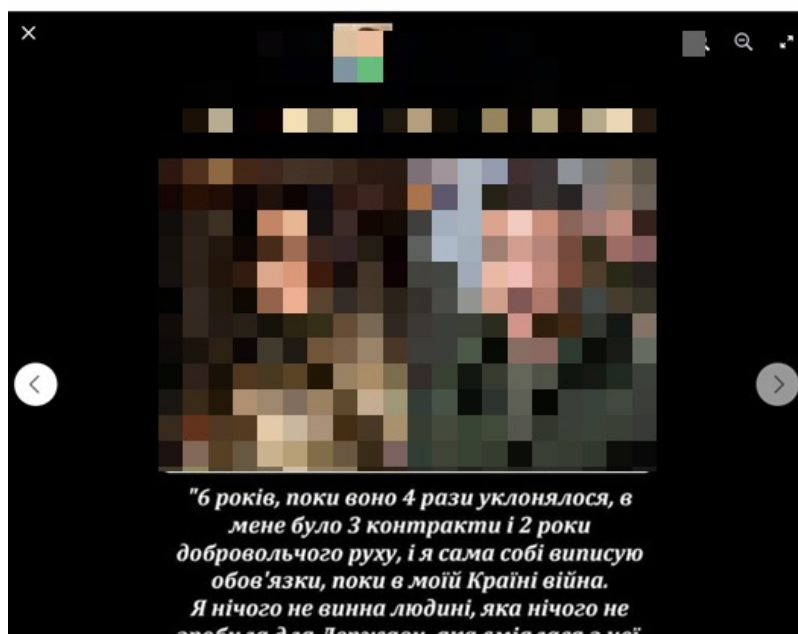
(8) [[He] even made **this coward** (Neut./Com.) a president before daring to trample on the constitution. Someone else might not have given up the seat. But with **the coward** (Neut./Com.), he knew he could toss some deputy position to **it** (Neut.) like a bone to a dog, and **it** (Neut.) would obediently bark]

Along with the grammatically incorrect agreement of the subject-predicate phrase in (7) where a feminine gender noun refers to a neuter gender one in the anaphoric chain, in (8), we find the referential chain *цикло – зам – воно*, where the grammatical gender reference becomes even more confusing if the reader is not aware of the extra-linguistic context.

However, this mixture of feminine and predominantly neuter grammatical forms exophorically refers to the male politician whose verbal and socio-political behaviour is highly criticised. Moreover, diminutive forms and positive connotation of nouns [female genitalia] and prodigy, followed by laughing emojis, make the whole utterance sarcastic and evil.

Nouns of common gender derived from verbs that denote actions disapproved by the speaker are negatively coloured and often abusive – for example, the noun *цикло* in (8). The noun is derived from the verb *сцятити*, which has a symbolic meaning ‘to be afraid’. This implication triggers gender transpositions in the passage (8). This lexical unit expresses a negative evaluation of the politician’s behaviour. Although the Ukrainian language has two variable forms, *сцикун* (Masc. slang) and *цикло* (Common, slang, more disparaging), the speaker prefers the neuter form as emotionally charged and discursively salient.

The use of *воно* in speech is colloquial and has particular connotations described above. For this reason, it may function as a very emotional stylistic device taking into account the extra-linguistic factors and the socio-political background of the text as in (9) or (10):



(9) [For 6 years, while **it avoided army service** (Neut.) 4 times, I signed 3 contracts and had 2 years in the volunteer movement, and I assign my duties while my country is at war];

(10) *Поки воно* (Neut.) з Штайнмайєром лобзається окупанти гатять з артилерії: 1 боєць ЗСУ загинув, 3 поранені [While **it** (Neut.) is kissing up to Steinmeier, the occupiers are shelling with artillery: 1 Ukrainian Armed Forces soldier perished, 3 are wounded].

In (9) and (10), the exophoric referent is designated by *воно*, which does not affect the decoding of the message and, to some extent, performs the nominating function. The pragmatic sense ‘to be afraid’ is actualised via the opposition of the predicates *уклонятися* [to avoid army service] – *мати контракт* [to sign a contract] / *бути в добровольчому русі* [to join volunteers] and *лобзатися* [to kiss] – *загинути* [to perish] / *бути пораненим* [to be wounded]. Ex-

ample (9) is decoded as conveying strong disapproval because the speaker is a female soldier who openly confronts the male; it makes the passage even more scornful.

The pragmatic meanings ‘to lie’ and ‘to be afraid’ can be accompanied by other connotations and combinations of meanings, such as ‘lack of education’ (earlier, we mentioned that neuter gender implies the opposition ‘adult – young’):

(11) “Що має зрозуміти [Президент] (Masc.) після розмови з [ним]”. А що має зрозуміти **дитинка** (Fem.), **яка вчилась** (Fem.) по підручниках “Учпедгиз – 1973”<sup>6</sup>. <...> **Він** (Masc.) *що, знає хто такий Володимир Хреститель*<sup>7</sup> чи *Данило Галицький*<sup>8</sup>, *Криштоф Косинський*<sup>9</sup> чи *Петро Сагайдачний*<sup>10</sup>! **Воно** (Neut.) *навіть інувгурації хотіло* (Neut.) *зробити 19 травня, у день “Советских пионеров”*<sup>11</sup> [“What should [President] (Masc.) understand after the conversation with [President].” And what should **the little one** (Fem.) understand, **who studied** (Fem.) from the textbooks “Uchpedhiz – 1973”? <...> Does **he** (Masc.) know who Vladimir the Baptizer, Daniil of Halych, Krzysztof Kossinski, or Petro Sahaidachny are! **It** (Neut.) even **wanted** (Neut.) to hold the inauguration on May 19, on the day of “Soviet pioneers”] [Babchenko, 2020].

In (11), we observe another non-standard referential chain, a combination of masculine ([President], він), feminine (дитинка) and neuter genders (воно), where *воно* implies the referent’s lack of education because the passage contrasts the content of Soviet textbooks (obviously, historical ones) and the prominent persons of Ukrainian state development. This use of *воно* to imply a ‘lack of education’ is significant because it reflects the changes in the Ukrainians’ world-views and means the negation of the Soviet-like cognition.

The pronoun *воно* regularly activates the pragmatic meaning ‘lack of education and/or patriotism’ as in (12) or (13):



(12) [Your language is artificial. You: Soviet Union. **It** (Neut.): SOVIET!!!

On the one hand, the exophoric reference of *воно* to the creature in the picture that accompanies the message is logical and does not exhibit any deviation; on the other – the imaginary dialogue is a response to a subscriber (a woman) who expressed a pro-soviet ideological opinion. Moreover, the creature in the picture is a meme that symbolically represents a generalised stranger or an outer space being who does not share the values of the community.

<sup>6</sup> Учпедгиз [Educational and Pedagogical State Publishing House] was the biggest governmental publishing house in Soviet times that provided books for schools.

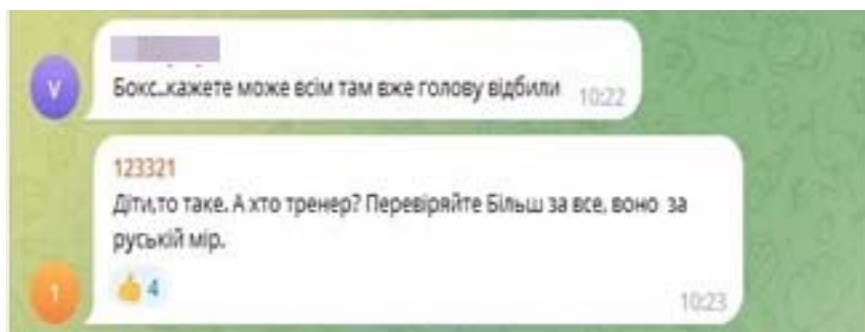
<sup>7</sup> Володимир Великий [Volodymyr I Sviatoslavych or Volodymyr the Great] baptised the Kyivan Rus in the 10th century.

<sup>8</sup> Данило Галицький [Daniel of Galicia] was the Kniaz of Galicia in the 13th century. He restored and expanded his lands.

<sup>9</sup> Криштоф Косинський [Krzysztof Kosiński] was a Cossack noble.

<sup>10</sup> Петро Конашевич-Сагайдачний [Petro Konashevych-Sahaidachny] was a Ukrainian political and civic leader, the Hetman of Ukrainian Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1616–1622, and a brilliant military leader.

<sup>11</sup> Советские пионеры [Young Pioneers] was a children’s organisation under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.



(13) [Children are one thing. But who's **the coach** (Masc./Com.)? Check it. Most likely, **it** (Neut.) supports the Russian world].

The comment is a response to a case of our teenage athletes showing solidarity with the Russians. The subscriber accuses the coach of being ideologically biased and lacking pedagogical skills.

Illustration (12) is specific and stands apart from other cases because it is accompanied by visual support that adds new senses to the imaginary dialogue: the picture represents the object the speaker is compared with. This case is the object of multimodal studies; its analysis needs a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of different modes of cooperation.

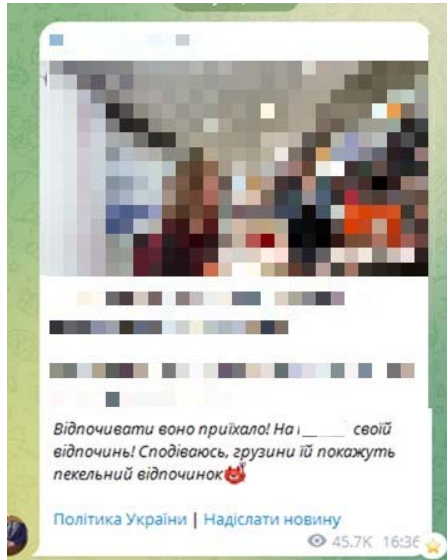
In example (12), the speaker / the admin and the subscriber argued previously (the written mode of the actual dialogue); later, the admin revealed his reaction to these arguments in the main channel (written and visual modes of an imaginary dialogue). This reaction allows the rest of the readers to know that the opponent is a woman (her name is not blurred in the post); however, the dialogue is presented as if it were between a modern patriotic Ukrainian and an alien, desperately trying to argue that everything must be different as he had been told before he landed in Ukraine. B. Cope and M. Kalantzis call it “multimodal overlay where a sense-maker builds a composite meaning, using one form then another to repeat and extend their meaning, in succession or simultaneously” <...> “through mental and physical work, the objects of thought can be transposed by the artefacts of text, image, space, object, body, sound, and speech” [Cope, Kalantzis, 2020, p. 40]. In other words, mental work in communication transposes the object of thought (a real woman) by an image of an alien. Besides, in our opinion, the transposition is twofold – an actual dialogue is substituted by an imaginary one; the pragmatic effect of these changes is a cognitive transposition of a real woman's **personality by a cosmic stranger**. However, this transposition remains superficial; the human being is not transposed by an alien, and an alien does not become a human; only some of their characteristics are actualised in this cognitive transposition.

The meaning form transposition in (12) becomes possible due to the social, historical or cognitive presupposition of multimodal transpositions; in this particular case, the image of an alien evokes various senses associated with it: ‘unaware of what is real and what is not’, ‘alien to the group’, even ‘crazy’ if we take into account pre-scientific beliefs that mental diseases depend on the influence of Moon (see the etymology of *lunatic*). The cognitive transposition is quite transparent as another mode realises it – a visual-written one; even more, it is widely read as the concept of an alien is understood similarly in various cultural, national or political groups of people.

Transposition of modes in (12) provides basis for the grammatical transposition of gender forms; the pronoun *воно* acquires additional colouring of evaluative nature, meaning ‘strange’, ‘uneducated’, ‘non-patriotic’, and even ‘stubborn’. It is worth mentioning that the case represents an interesting fact of axiological opposition: the group ‘we’ is opposed to ‘they’ via the imaginary dialogue where the communicants are not marked as belonging to any sex. Instead, the pronoun *ми*, meaning ‘any representative of the group irrelevant of sex distinctions’ marks ‘us’ although ‘they’ is marked by *воно*, which adds new sense to the situation. If we compare (12) and (14) or (17), for example, we can see the difference. A Russian woman is not ‘we’ a priori, as well as Medvedchuk, despite his Ukrainian citizenship – their ideological and social-cultural iden-

tification is obvious. The woman in (12) is a supposed patriotic member of the group 'we' (she subscribes to a patriotic channel, speaks Ukrainian, or for other reasons not obvious to us now). Still, she insists on the use of the adjective *радянський* instead of *совецький* (the reasons might be various – from the lack of humour to the pro-soviet ideological position). Thus, she appears on the outskirts of the group 'we'; the admin employs the strategy of outgrouping the member of 'us' to consolidate the rest of the group. This case demonstrates both the linguistic-pragmatic and cognitive processes in the language of texts on socio-political issues and the societal dynamics within Ukraine, which are currently crystallising under the conditions of war.

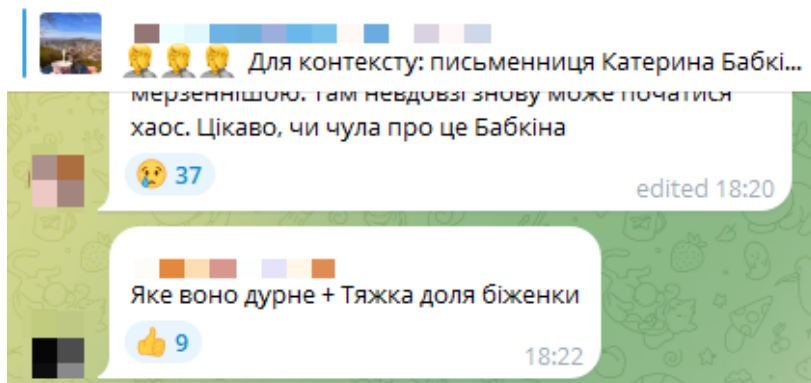
The examples clearly demonstrate that the pronoun *воно* can be used to refer to people of both sexes to disapprove any ways of socially or ideologically unacceptable behaviour, like here:



(14) [It (Neut.) came to rest! Rest in your [Russia]! I hope the Georgians will show her (Fem.) a hellish vacation 🍌]

The final emoji in (14) – the element of multimodality – is the trigger of the hint on the emotional and cognitive sublayer mocking the referent. The pragmatic impact is effective only if the reader is aware of the current political situation in Ukraine and Georgia and of the mutual support of the people of both countries. The composite pragmatic effect is achieved by combining several linguistic means, grammatical gender transposition being one of them.

Unacceptable behaviour of a representative of the group 'we' is stigmatised in (15) in response to a Ukrainian writer Kateryna Babkina's photo signed «Кава із видом снайпера» [Coffee with a Sniper View] from the hill near Sarajevo from which the city dwellers were shot during the siege:



(15) *Яке воно* (Neut.) *дурне + Тяжка доля біженки* (Fem.) [How stupid it (Neut.) is + The harsh fate of a refugee (Fem.)].

### Discussion

The axiological classification of a referent as 'the other' / 'they' or as deviant can only occur after evaluating the referent from the speaker's point of view. As a result, the referent is perceived as not good enough, worse or bad, and is considered an opponent, an outcast or even an enemy. Evaluation of the referent's axiology is based on their actions and influences the referent's linguistic representation on the lexical and grammatical levels.

Ukrainian-speaking socio-political discourse, both in online media and in social media, allows for releasing the evaluative potential of the grammatical category of gender: here, the Ukrainian language's flexibility and variability of gender forms fit the speaker's intentional evaluation of the current socio-political events and the people involved in them. In other words, violation of various grammatical norms functions to mark the 'we' – 'they' opposition. The pragmatic potential of grammatical gender forms is revealed primarily in the choice of syntactic and derivational variants or, less regularly, in purely grammatical gender transpositions; modern social media also gives examples of a multimodal representation of this opposition.

Neuter and common gender transpositions give a wide variety of lexical and grammatical combinability and meanings conveyed by them. Switches to neuter and common genders are based on the logical non-equivalence of referential names in the subject-predicate phrases. Flexibility in the syntactic coordination of common gender forms and intentional choice of neuter gender in contrast to the actual sex of the referent create the effect of negative evaluation in the socio-political context with a tinge of contempt as emotional colouring.

Repetitive switching to neuter gender to show the negative evaluation of the referent's actions allows building referential chains with exophoric elements and cataphoric elaboration of other referent's nominations. In (5), (7), (8), (9), and (13), for example, the evaluative and emotional components of the utterances prevail over the informative ones because the pronoun *воно* occupies a central position in the blocks and implies what is known.

The neuter-gender pronoun's pragmatic meanings appear as a response to extra-linguistic triggers – current actions or beliefs of the referents. Accordingly, the pragmatic effect of gender asymmetry is the actualisation of such meanings as 'to lie', 'to be afraid' and 'to be despised', 'to betray', which appear to be discursively linked, e.g., (5), (6), (8), (9). Referential chains involving the pronoun *воно* appear in mixed combinations with nouns of other genders (5), (6), (8), (11), (14), (16); however, it remains the dominant element of expressing negative evaluation because of the 'lack of education' (11), (12), 'lack of patriotism' (10), (11), (13), (17), 'being otherworldly' (13) sometimes with the additional emotional colouring of 'pity because of age (too young or too old)' (11), (16).

The axiological evaluation of objects marked by transposed gender forms in all the cases analysed in this research is 'scorn' or 'contempt'. The analysis proves that the semantic potential of the grammatical category of gender in the Ukrainian language is revealed to its fullest in the socio-political discourse. Traditional meanings associated with sexes and grammatical gender as their realisation show specific pragmatic potential. The most effective method of expressing evaluation is the neuter gender. As scholars have stated, it stands apart from the masculine/feminine opposition and conveys various communicative meanings. Similar to neuter is common gender, a rich source of lexical connotations and grammatically flexible forms. Socio-political discourse is, first, a field for actualising discursively linked meanings of neuter gender. It implies a sense of disapproval (the referent is 'bad') accompanied by various emotional overtones and hidden reasoning of disapproval. The pragmatic trigger for creating the evaluative meaning is the actual action or state, which marks the referent negatively.

Grammatical gender switches, mainly the frequency of their use and the pragmatic load of neuter-gender forms and the pronoun *воно*, can be viewed as the marker of modern Ukrainian communication in socio-political discourse.

### Conclusions

The research has demonstrated the significant pragmatic potential of grammatical gender transpositions in modern Ukrainian socio-political discourse. The flexibility of the Ukrainian lan-

guage allows speakers to convey nuanced meanings, particularly through the intentional use of neuter-gender forms, which express various senses and focus the addressees' attention on the negative evaluation of the referents.

The findings show that grammatical gender asymmetry serves as a powerful linguistic mechanism for emphasising axiological differences in this type of discourse. This is primarily achieved through the use of the pronoun *BOHO* and its associative meanings of the following set of senses: lying, betrayal, cowardice, lack of education, lack of patriotism, or both, the idea of being other-worldly due to the repeated denial of evident ideological postulates of the group "we". Unlike in the Ukrainian language traditional gender transpositions, the sense of pity or slight irony is rare; instead, *BOHO* evokes contempt or mockery and pity because of a failure to change the referent's perception of the socio-political situation. Moreover, the prevalence of such gender switches in media and social media highlights the sensitive nature of language in reflecting contemporary societal attitudes. Therefore, for example, no instances of neuter-gender transpositions were found to express tenderness, fondness, sympathy, or the euphemistic softening of insults.

In conclusion, the pragmatic effect of grammatical gender transpositions in Ukrainian extends beyond mere linguistic flexibility, serving as an evaluative device that resonates with readers' perceptions of current socio-political realities. As language continues to evolve alongside social changes, the role of gender asymmetry in discourse offers valuable insight into how linguistic structures adapt to express complex ideological and emotional responses in times of significant societal upheaval.

### Adherence to Ethical Standards

The use of public Telegram and Facebook profiles as research material is acceptable and complies with the principles and rules of publication ethics of the Publishing Resource Kit (PERK) and does not contradict the principles of academic integrity established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), since all public profiles were anonymized. Using the data gathered from Telegram and Facebook adhered to ethical research standards, the ethical guidelines for digital research from the British Sociological Association, and standards of Social Data Science Lab.

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#### **EVALUATIVE POTENTIAL OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER ASYMMETRY IN UKRAINIAN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MEDIA DISCOURSE**

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**Key words:** *pragmatic potential, grammatical transposition, neuter gender, co-referential chain, pronoun воно, evaluation, axiology, socio-political discourse.*

This study *aims* to define the peculiarity of grammatical gender asymmetry in the modern Ukrainian language in socio-political texts to highlight the factors contributing to the expression of certain implied pragmatic meanings, as well as to identify these meanings. In this research, we set the following tasks: to review what evaluative pragmatic potential the grammatical category of gender in the Ukrainian language has; to reveal which implied communicative meanings the violation of the categorial grammatical norm actualises in social and mass media texts on socio-political issues (specifically, switches between masculine / feminine and neuter / common gender in co-referential pairs); to identify the pragmatic triggers of these meanings in modern socio-political environment. To achieve the aim and complete the tasks the contextual-interpretative *method* (to define the author's pragmatic aim with regard to the socio-political topic of the text), the method of interactive modelling (to define and generalise the emotional elements of the meaning created and to hypothesise on the possible systemic nature of these means) and the method of structural analysis (to identify the linguistic means that help objectivise the pragmatic intention) are used.

Modern discussion of socio-political issues tends to express subjective opinion and emotional perception of the facts of reality, which makes it possible to clearly identify the subjects of communication and assign them to the 'we' / 'them' groups. The article analyses the pragmatic potential of grammatical norms violation in co-referential chains (anaphoric, cataphoric, and exophoric references) by using grammatical transpositions in Ukrainian socio-political discourse.

The analysis proves that masculine-feminine / neutral transformations lead to communicative implications with various pragmatic consequences. The understanding of these meanings depends on two factors: the communicators' mastery of the systemic potential of the Ukrainian language, as well as the communicators' degree of immersion in the socio-political issues of Ukrainian society, as a result, the perception of referents varies – they may be marked as axiologically close or alien.

We conclude that the transposition of feminine / masculine and neuter genders is the most effective in expressing evaluation, as it forms an opposition to the traditional gender pair and conveys a wide range of communicative meanings. Common gender is similar to neuter gender and serves as a rich source of lexical connotations and grammatically flexible forms. It is the socio-political discourse that is the field

for the actualisation of discursively related meanings of the neuter gender: here, **the communicative-pragmatic** meaning of disapproval / condemnation of the referent is actualised, accompanied by various emotional shades and hidden arguments of disapproval. The pragmatic trigger for the creation of this evaluative meaning lies in ideological background (the referent is a coward, an ignoramus, a traitor, an admirer of the “Russian World” / “Soviet Union”, etc.).

Grammatical gender transpositions in co-referential chains, in particular, the frequency of their use and the pragmatic load of neuter noun forms and the pronoun *воно*, can be considered a marker of modern Ukrainian communication in socio-political discourse.

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