

**LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT
OF VICTORIA BELIM'S MEMOIR "THE ROOSTER HOUSE":
NATIONALLY BIASED LEXICON**

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The current research explores the complex relationship between memory, culture and language, showing how they influence each other and shape the author's perception of events and cultural identity; what role language plays in the formation of national culture. Simultaneously, peculiarities of memoir as a literary genre of storytelling have been outlined. The objective of the study is analyzing the function of realia as nationally biased vocabulary occurring in memoir literature for representing culture and communicating personal experiences against a social and historical background. The research is based on Victoria Belim's book "The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir" in which the author interlaces her Ukrainian family's history with a broader social, cultural, and historical landscape. The writer also breaks the silence surrounding her missing relative by uncovering the painful truth about his imprisonment and tragic fate. Writing about her visit to Ukraine after a long absence, which was triggered by the ongoing war unleashed by Russia, she shares her childhood memories which add to redefining her identity. Describing the traumatic events which occurred in Ukraine during Soviet times up to present day, such as Holodomor, Chornobyl, Maidan, etc., she turns the national tragedy into her personal one. Moreover, she strongly believes in the resilience of Ukrainian people, and hopes for their victory. In her narration, Victoria Belim uses multiple religious, culinary, historical, symbolic, cultural and other kinds of realia, which enrich the cultural texture of her memoir, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the realities of Ukrainian life. These linguistic elements function as cultural markers, and essentially contribute to the social, historical and cultural colour scheme of the book.

МОВА І КУЛЬТУРА У КОНТЕКСТІ МЕМУАРІВ ВІКТОРІЇ БЕЛІМ “THE ROOSTER HOUSE”: НАЦІОНАЛЬНО МАРКОВАНА ЛЕКСИКА

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Запропоноване дослідження розглядає, як пам'ять, культура та мова взаємопов'язані, як вони впливають одна на одну та формують сприйняття подій і культурну ідентичність авторів, яку роль відіграє мова у становленні національної культури. Також у статті окреслюються особливості мемуарів як літературного жанру. Метою роботи є аналіз особливостей використання реалій – національно забарвленої лексики – у мемуарній літературі для відображення культури та передачі особистих переживань на соціальному та історичному тлі. Матеріалом дослідження слугує книга Вікторії Белім “The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir”, у якій авторка розповідає про історію своєї родини у соціальному, культурному та історичному контексті. Вона також розриває мовчання навколо зниклого родича, відкриваючи болісну правду про його ув'язнення та трагічну долю. Розповідаючи про свою поїздку в Україну (після довготривалої відсутності), на яку її надихнула війна, віроломно розв'язана Росією, Белім ділиться спогадами дитинства, намагаючись переосмислити та віднайти власну ідентичність. Вона описує драматичні події, що відбувалися в Україні від радянських часів до сьогодення – Голодомор, Чорнобиль, Революцію Гідності – перетворюючи загальнонаціональну трагедію на особисту. Водночас авторка глибоко вірить у культурно-історичну, духовну та національну незламність українського народу та його майбутню перемогу. У своїй книзі Вікторія Белім використовує чимало релігійних, кулінарних, історичних, символічних, культурних та інших реалій. Ця національно забарвлена лексичні одиниці збагачують культурну тканину її мемуарного твору, дозволяючи читачам зануритися в реалії українського життя. Ці мовні елементи виконують роль культурних маркерів, які наповнюють її розповідь живими барвами, роблячи її ще більш автентичною та проникливою.

Introduction. Language and culture are closely interlaced, therefore, they should be understood within their social and contextual settings. Traditionally perceived as static, monolithic entities comprising fixed sets of knowledge and skills expressed by individuals, they are now increasingly examined with reference to a social background. Focusing on structural aspects of language, a lot of scholars pay special attention to its use in social contexts, and explore how closely connected language and culture are. For example, Godwin-Jones (2023: 63) highlights this idea in the following way: “Like culture, language is all around us and we may take it for granted, just as we do the values, beliefs, and behaviors that make up our cultural identity.” Exploring the interrelation between language, culture, politics and identity, Corinne A. Seals maintains that “there is a strong binding tie between experiences and language”, and considers that “language and historical memory are

two interconnected identities” (Seals, 2020: 98), wherein experiences and historical memory undoubtedly incorporate culture.

As language is an integral part of national culture, it plays a crucial role in its formation. The interplay between language, culture, and thought shapes both the national mindset and character. It is notable that elements of national identity are frequently reflected in phraseological expressions, idioms, proverbs, tropes, realia, etc. Each language is unique both in its structure and in the national perspectives it embodies. The categorization of the objective world is reflected in its lexical elements, with phraseology being one of the components of the linguistic worldview (Abuseridze & Stambolishvili, 2019: 37–45). According to Anna Wierzbicka (2013), the vocabulary of a language mirrors the unique interests of its speakers. For those who use a particular language, their words are compliant with their perception of the world, which is

shaped, partially, by what they choose to focus on and find meaningful.

The interconnection of language and culture is widely represented in memoirs, which are based on storytelling. Being a fundamental part of human nature, storytelling is essential for building our sense of self and identity, fostering connections with others, and shaping plans for the future, all of which contribute to our psychological and social well-being. The act of personal storytelling is a creative endeavor deeply shaped by the culture in which it is immersed (Wang & Yang, 2022). Multiple studies view storytelling in the form of personal memoir as telling one's side of the story in a way that both creates and reflects one's life context from social and cultural perspectives (e.g. Karn & Takahiko, 2018; Wang, 2013; Wang et al., 2017). Culture influences the information that is retained in memory. Memories are especially significant because they can both shape and mirror a person's experiences in the world. The specific details of these memories are crucial in shaping how an individual perceives the world and develops their sense of self (Millar et al., 2013: 139).

Defining memoirs, Kristen Lamb (2020) states that this storytelling genre is becoming increasingly popular. She maintains that its style is not only supposed to reflect the personality of the author-storyteller, but also "to hit that sweet spot in tone that is appropriate for the story. This aids us in connecting with audiences and generating long-lasting resonance." Abi Wurdeman (2024) considers that memoirs offer a window into the thoughts, emotions, and lives of individuals. They provide comfort during shared struggles, prompt us to question our beliefs, and prove that we are more alike than we may realize. Thus, the present research is aimed at analyzing the realia as lexical means resorted to in memoir literature for representing culture and communicating personal experiences against a social background. The analysis is based on Victoria Belim's book "The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family Memoir" (2024), which serves as a perceptive example of how memory contributes to understanding narrative structures, linguistic nuances, and the symbolic cognitive processes tied to a particular form of cultural expression and individual interpretation (Wayne, 1994). Victoria Belim traces the history of her Ukrainian family within the context of its social, cultural, and historical background. She also unravels the mystery surrounding her missing relative, uncovering the story of his imprisonment and death.

Materials and Methods. The book "The Rooster House: A Ukrainian Family memoir" by Victoria Belim presents the empirical material for the research. This kind of literature is the context in which the author, through the lens of her own memories, recreates social and cultural memory of the people,

country, and the whole epoch. The corpus comprises nationally biased lexical units, realia, – words and expressions used for naming culture-specific objects and phenomena (e.g., food, clothes, etc.). The examples are chosen by means of the method of manual selection. The procedure of the analysis comprises: 1) defining the realia in the discourse; 2) classifying them thematically; 3) analyzing them in the context specifying their cultural peculiarities. The following methods have been applied in the present research: 1) Critical Discourse Analysis aimed at finding out how specific words shape national and cultural identity; 2) Comparative Lexical Analysis for comparing how English and Ukrainian encode nationally biased concepts.

Results and Discussion. Victoria Belim's memoir is abundant in Ukrainian realia, nominations of national and cultural objects and phenomena. The author uses them in their denotative meaning mainly in a transliterated form (e.g., *paska*, *salo*, *marshrutka*, *rushnyk*). Those words of nationally biased lexicon undoubtedly contribute to Belim's cultural identity – "the values, beliefs, and behaviors inherited from belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group" (Godwin-Jones, 2023), and serve as nation-constructing elements. The realia occurring in the book are of different types, e.g., religious – *paska*, *roast pork for Easter*, *Maundy Thursday*; culinary – *salo*, *syrnyky*, *borsch*, *Puzata Hata*, *kirpichik*; historical – *Maidan*, *Holodomor*; cultural and symbolic artifacts – *rushnyk*, *vyshyvanka*, *cherry orchard*; household artifacts – *sarai*, *the red corner*, *summer kitchen*; transport – *marshrutka*, etc.

As Victoria Belim studied political science, she tried to make sense of Ukrainian politics. However, it puzzled her so much that she called deciphering it "a senseless affair." Focusing on redefining her identity, she immerses herself into Ukrainian history, which accounts for the use of historical realia in her memoir, one of which is *Maidan*. The term implies the events which were going on Maidan Nezalezhnosti in 2014. Fully absorbed by the shocking events, she watched the news footage, seeing the following tragic pictures: "*When government forces attacked the protesters, the gathering grew, drawing people of all classes and backgrounds. The government response became brutal and culminated with the shooting of protesters by snipers*" (Belim, 2024: 7). The Maidan she saw then, with "*red puddles on the pavement, bullet holes and burning car tires*" was absolutely different from the Maidan of her adolescence, where she walked with her friend before leaving Ukraine for the USA. On the one hand, related to her personal past, it had a sentimental value for her. On the other hand, it became a universal symbol of resistance, democracy, and struggle for independence.

Another historical realia, connected with the tragic past of Ukraine in general and of Victoria's family in particular, is *Holodomor*, i.e. the Great Famine in Ukraine. To illustrate the "*chilling reality of the Great Famine in Ukraine*" and the damage caused by Stalin's policy, Victoria Belim provides facts and figures from official sources: "*Every eighth person in the Ukrainian territories fell victim to the **Holodomor**, the Great Famine. One million children under the age of ten died. The toll of the famine was more than three million*" (Belim, 2024: 132–133). Simultaneously, she shares her great-grandmother Asya's stories about the horrors of those times, which were retold by Valentina, Victoria's grandmother. Asya survived due to the fact that she agreed to marry Sergiy, "a principled Bolshevik", who proposed to her having brought her a loaf of bread. Asya described how requisition brigades went from house to house and brutally took from the villagers all their grain, "*searched the yard and the house, and even dug up the clay floors and unraveled the straw roofs*" (Belim, 2024: 131). She painted terrifying pictures which she saw on her way home from school, "*trying not to notice the corpses with bloated bellies at the side of the road*" (Belim, 2024: 132).

Telling about her return to the town of Bereh in Poltava region, which she believes to be her second home (after Kyiv, where she was born), Victoria Belim acquaints readers with her grandmother Valentina's way of life and traditions which were typical of most Ukrainians. One of the artifacts related to the great Christian holiday of Easter is marked by means of the religious realia *paska*. It is notable that the author supplies it with an explanation to make it clear for English-speaking readers: "*She <...> gave me a list of ingredients for the **paska**, an Easter brioche baked in a tall cylindrical mould*" (Belim, 2024: 64). She portrays the magic of preparing the dough, focusing on the details of the process, naming the ingredients and vividly describing the scents and flavours: "*I measured out the flour, milk and yeast into a large wooden basin <...> and plunged my hands into the lumpy mixture. The creamy scent of wheat enveloped me*" (Belim, 2024: 64). Victoria recalls the Easters of her childhood, which were not regularly celebrated because of her great-grandfather's political views. However, it was a family tradition to make "*paska every spring to enjoy the rich taste of the buttery brioche full of rum-soaked raisins and candid orange peel*" (Belim, 2024: 64). Another Easter-related tradition mentioned in the memoir, is making *roast pork*. In Ukrainian culture it is not just a delicious dish, but also a meaningful symbol as it marks the end of Lent and the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. The preparation of roast pork is a symbol of prosperity, abundance, and gratitude, and it plays a central role in bringing together family for a festive, joyful

Easter feast. During Victoria's visit, her grandmother wanted to make it for Easter, but the prices on meat had risen, and she couldn't afford it. Therefore, they had chicken instead.

In her other childhood memory, Victoria Belim mentions *salo*, which refers to a traditional food that is deeply rooted in the culinary culture of Ukraine. With great warmth, she narrates how Sergiy, her great-grandfather, was making breakfast. Again, not to confuse English-speaking readers, she explains the meaning of the realia: "*He cut up salo, a beloved Ukrainian delicacy of cured pork fat, with the flourish of a Michelin-starred chef. The moment a drop of water hissed on the shiny black surface of a frying pan, Sergiy tossed the ivory dominoes of salo*" (Belim, 2024: 103–104). Vividly describing every detail of the process and mentioning the sounds, Victoria paints a true-to-life picture with a touch of nostalgia. She also resorts to the allusion "*with the flourish of a Michelin-starred chef*" to emphasize how skillful Sergiy was at cooking, and the metaphor "*the ivory dominoes of salo*" to illustrate how delicious the product looked.

There also occur more recent realia in the narration. For example, *Puzata Hata* ('Potbellied Hut') – the transliterated name of a popular Ukrainian chain of restaurants offering traditional Ukrainian cuisine in a cozy atmosphere. The word humorously implies abundance and generosity, often associated with Ukrainian hospitality, where food and sharing meals are central to family and social life. When her relative Dmytro invited her to *Puzata Hata* for breakfast, Victoria had no idea what it was. But then, she found out what kind of place it was, and familiarized the reader with the dishes they enjoyed, all of which belonged to traditional Ukrainian cuisine, the transliterated names being given a descriptive version for non-Ukrainian speakers to understand: "*I ordered a plate of **varenyky**, crescent-shaped dumplings with potatoes, and asked for extra soured cream. Dmytro selected cabbage and cucumber salad, black bread and **tefteli**, meatballs in tomato sauce*" (Belim, 2024: 39).

Another linguo-cultural peculiarity of Victoria Belim's memoir is the use of the names of Ukrainian cultural and symbolic artifacts such as *rushnyk* ('an embroidered towel') and *vyshyvanka* ('an embroidered shirt'), representing culturally unique objects, symbolizing Ukrainian identity, often reflecting regional styles, family traditions, and historical narratives through their embroidery patterns and colors. Her first face-to-face conscious encounter with Ukrainian art of embroidery happened when she stepped into Saint Nicolas church and got acquainted with Pani Olga ('pani', being "*an old-fashioned word for lady*" – explains the author). The woman dispelled Victoria's ignorance of the symbolic significance of the embroidered artifacts. She explained that

rushnyky were used for different purposes, accompanying Ukrainian people throughout their life, in happy and sad moments. They “served as talismans, which <...> draped icons whether at home or at the church. <...> A rushnyk holds a new-born baby. <...> It binds newlyweds to symbolize an unending union. <...> The longest rushnyk is that one that lowers a coffin into the ground” (Belim, 2024: 86). Moreover, Victoria was filled in on the meaning of different types of embroidered patterns on *vyshyvanky*, their deeply-rooted motifs, and intricacies of the Reshetylivka white-on-white embroidery which was recently recognized as a UNESCO cultural treasure.

A very powerful Ukrainian symbolic realia which is mentioned in the analyzed memoir is the *cherry orchard*. In Ukrainian folklore, it is closely associated with homeland and symbolizes Ukraine’s rural beauty, traditional way of life, and deep connection to the land. Victoria Belim’s perception of their cherry orchard in Bereh, which had been planted by her great-grandmother Asya and later tended to by her grandmother Valentina, reflects how her worldview has been molded in the course of time. First it used to be a comfortable place of relaxation where young Victoria was “devouring novels of Jule Verne under the spreading branches of cherry trees”. Then, after leaving Ukraine for the USA, she had nostalgic, romantic memories “of afternoon teas under the blooming boughs.” Later, while reading Taras Shevchenko’s famous poem “A cherry orchard near the house,” she saw in her mind’s eye their orchard which gradually became an image of a peaceful Ukrainian village, a symbol of national identity. Today, in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the symbolic meaning of the cherry orchard became clear to Victoria Belim. She maintains that it came to symbolize resilience, unbending spirit and fight for preserving Ukrainian identity and sovereignty. And highlighting this idea, she finishes her book with such life-asserting words: “We carry on living and we tend to our garden one day at a time, one tree at a time. The orchard still stands full of sunlight and birdsong, and its bounty is a refusal to submit to despair and fear. Every bud and every branch is a reminder of the irrepressible *vivre memento* that illuminates the darkest of days with hope” (Belim, 2024: 286).

Conclusions. Victoria Belim’s memoir “The Rooster House” serves as a powerful example of how language and culture intertwine to shape personal and collective identity. Through the use of nationally biased lexicon, the author not only conveys her family’s history but also reflects the broader socio-cultural and historical landscape of Ukraine. Her narrative highlights how language can incorporate cultural memory, reflecting national experiences, values, and emotions. By employing various realia – religious,

culinary, historical, and symbolic – Belim enriches the cultural texture of her memoir, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the realities of Ukrainian life. These linguistic elements function as cultural markers, reinforcing the connection between language, identity, and historical awareness. Moreover, the memoir highlights the resilience of the Ukrainian people, as Belim transforms national tragedies into deeply personal reflections, bridging past and present. Her journey of self-discovery, shaped by language and memory, illustrates the essential role that literature plays in preserving and passing down cultural heritage. Finally, this study reaffirms the idea that the function of language is twofold – it is a means of communication and a keeper of identity. In “The Rooster House”, the use of nationally biased vocabulary becomes a powerful tool of storytelling, remembrance, and resistance, emphasizing the enduring power of words in shaping both personal and national narratives.

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