

Alyeksyeyeva I. O.,

PhD, Associate Professor,

Associate Professor at the Department of English Philology and Intercultural Communication

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3109-0331>

UNDERSTANDING AGENCY: FROM THEORETICAL GRAMMAR TO LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND DISCOURSE STUDIES

Summary. The objective of the study is to follow the evolution of the term agency in Linguistics from the 1960s, when Agent appeared among semantic primitives in Fillmore's Case Grammar and was interpreted as a performer of an action, up to the current research in the field of Linguistic Anthropology and Discourse Studies. The study reveals that the notion of agency was first based on formal properties manifested syntactically, but then it gradually shifted to ever more pronounced reliance on extralingual (psychological, culture-specific or ideological) factors. Thus, the Agent set off as the subject of transitive verbs contrasted to the object and the subject of intransitive ones. Yet, analysis of semantic properties peculiar to individual transitive verbs, as well as the noun category of animacy or inanimacy made lexical meaning important for assigning the Agent role to a participant of an event. Morphological features peculiar to verbalizers of the Agent were summed up in the Animacy Hierarchy, with first- and second-person pronouns appearing as the Agent more often than third-person pronouns, animate or inanimate nouns. In addition to animacy, volition and ability to exercise control were added to the list of the Agent's prerequisites. In other words, agency could not be an objective characteristic but rather, the speaker's subjective interpretation of an event. Advances of Linguistic Anthropology have offered insight into the studies of agency since they highlight how differently people across cultures (in particular, those showing differences along the collectivism-individualism continuum) interpret events in terms of causation and, correspondingly, participants' responsibility and control. Discourse studies of modern mediated communication, in their turn, shed light on the relation between the Agent and identity, while Critical Analysis of political discourse considers agency as a capacity to bring about sociocultural change, where the Agent's propensity to act and causal relations depend on the worldview maintained within the community's ideological frame.

Key words: agency, Agent, Theoretical Grammar, Linguistic Anthropology, Discourse Studies.

Problem statement. Fundamental issues of Theoretical Grammar keep attracting modern linguists [1; 2, 3] who effectively merge classical syntactic theories with current perspectives on language as a tool used to construct, maintain and modify worldviews, personality, identity and community. A concept borrowed from Philosophy where it is employed to discuss determinism of human existence, the social action theory, moral responsibility and other metaphysical and ethical issues, agency integrates innovative and classical approaches. Studied within Chomsky's generative paradigm in the late 1950s – early 1960s and later scrutinized by many outstanding linguists [4; 5; 6], *agency* (also referred to as *agentivity*)

is defined as a linguistically verbalized semantic feature of primary and secondary participants to an event.

The objective of the research is to follow the trajectory of the terms agency and Agent from their appearance in Fillmore's Case Grammar in the late 1960s up to their application in contemporary Linguistic Anthropology and Discourse Studies.

Research results. Originally, agentivity had a syntactic dimension arising from the three basic relations of Subject of an intransitive verb (*Jack returned home*), Agent, or subject, of a transitive verb (*Jack hates jogging*) and Object of a transitive verb (*Mary drank tea*) verbalized in a particular way in every language [7, p. 6]. The semantic roles of the subject in a sentence are diverse: Agent (*Jack poured the tea*), Actor (*Mary ran*), Perceiver (*John saw a snake*), Instrument (*The hammer broke the glass*), Patient (*The old woman died*). Subjects may be treated in grammatically different ways, which results in difficulties defining the linguistic subject [8, p. 98–101]. In grammars of most European languages, subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs are treated in the same way, whereas objects of transitive verbs are treated differently. This phenomenon is called *accusativity*. However, there are languages where the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb are regarded syntactically in the same way, while the subject of a transitive verb shows a difference [9, p. 37]. In Modern English, however, the noun paradigm is considerably reduced, so *accusativity* is not marked formally, which entailed a further analysis of this category in terms of its subtle semantic properties.

In his famous publication *The Case for Case*, Fillmore tried to present Syntax, Morphology, and Semantics as inseparable phenomena while insisting on “the centrality of syntax” and arguing for “the importance of covert categories” [4, p. 3]. The scholar stated that there are “semantic primitives” [4, p. 11] such as the notions of agent and patient and that “[W]hen the noun is nominative, its ‘syntactic meaning’ may be that of agent, patient, or anything else” [4, p. 11]. According to Fillmore, it is relevant to distinguish Agentive, Instrumental, Dative, Factitive, and other cases, where Agentive is the case of “the typically animate perceived instigator of the action identified by the verb” [4, p. 24]. In the footnote, the scholar admits knowing “of no way of dealing” [4, p. 24] with such occurrences as inanimate nouns (e.g., *robot*) or institutions (e.g., *nation*) and therefore extends “animateness” to include them as well. The subtlety of the Agent and its semantic underpinning may be illustrated with the frame for the verbs *to kill* and *to murder*. Fillmore points out that for *to kill*, the frame presupposes specifying an Instrument or an Agent, while the verb *to murder* requires an Agent [4, p. 28]. Compare:

The tree [Instrument] **killed** three people vs *The terrorist* [Agent] **killed** three people

*The *tree* [Instrument?] **murdered** three people vs The *terrorist* [Agent] **murdered** three people.

In other words, agency is defined as a relation between an action and its doer, which is a quite abstract though intuitively clear notion [5, p. 11]. Verbalization of agency is ascribed to different language levels: morphology (the Agentive case [4]) and lexical semantics (agentive verbs [10] and nouns [11]).

The shift towards studying communication rather than solely the language system drew linguists' attention to extralingual factors that influence linguistic choices of speakers. In 1976, Silverstein put forward an 'Animacy Hierarchy' where nouns and nounal phrases were arranged on the spectrum between ergativity and accusativity [12]. Dixon draws on Silverstein's idea and argues that "a speaker will think in terms of doing things to other people to a much greater extent than in terms of things being done to him. In the speaker's view of the world, as it impinges on him and as he describes it in language, he will be the quintessential agent" [7, p. 84]. Ahearn proposes the graphic visualization of the Hierarchy (Fig. 1):

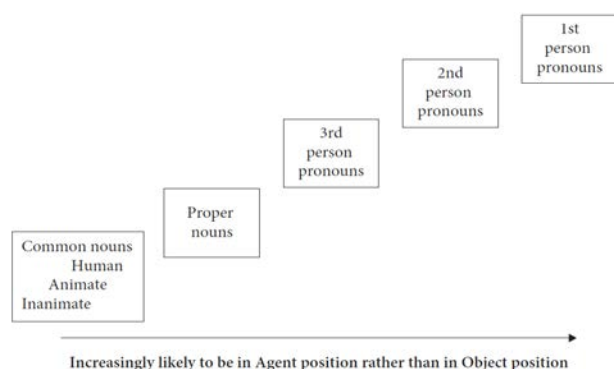


Fig. 1. The Animacy Hierarchy [9, p. 39]

In other words, it is claimed to be a universal grammatical principle that the speaker appears as the "most salient person" in communication [13, p. 210], with the addressee being the second to be found in the Agent position. The participants absent from an interaction were ranked as follows: third-person pronouns, proper pronouns, animate nouns (first of all those referring to humans, then to non-humans) and, finally, common nouns referring to inanimate objects. At this point, the research focus was mostly on grammatical rather than social aspects of agency. However, that was to be changed.

In 1983, DeLancy pointed out that agency had become problematic to define because many researchers started to include in its meaning such components as controllability, volition and animacy [11], whereas some of these features might be missing in the meaning of an agentive construction. For example, *a builder* is a prototypical Agent, while *a runner* is not because *to run* is an intransitive verb and cannot take a direct object, *a loser* loses involuntarily, *wind* and *lightning* are inanimate. Hence, DeLancy concludes that the key semantic component of agency is causation of an event and this is exactly what *builders*, *losers*, *runners*, *wind*, and *lightning* have in common [11, p. 182] (see also [14, p. 162]).

Considering language from the point of view of Linguistic Anthropology, Duranti suggests understanding agency as "the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object

of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)" [15, p. 453]. The scholar differentiates between two dimensions: agency performance and agency encoding. According to the scholar, performance appears on the "ego-affirming level" (the very act of speaking affirms one as an Agent) and on the "act-constituting level" (here, Duranti draws primarily on Austin's Speech Act theory that treats utterances as actions). Encoding of agency (i.e., grammatical and discourse devices) is generalized with the following: 1. *centrality of agency in languages*, 2. *diversity of encoding of agency*, 3. *mitigation of agency* [15, p. 460]. In other words, all languages dispose of a range of means to express agency and all languages offer structures to obfuscate or mitigate it. Thus, agentless passive and impersonal sentences of various types are cases of agency mitigation. Yet, there are other mitigating means. Here belong, for example, four types of "agent-oriented modality" (obligation, necessity, ability, and desire) [16], since modal verbs in the sentences *You should be polite*, *You may sit there*, etc. inform hearers "with a sense of how speakers are representing their own as well as others' obligations within a primarily language-constructed (actually discourse-constructed) moral world" [15, p. 465]. The mitigation notion resolves Fillmore's dilemma of interpreting agency of *robot* or *nation*: "by representing actions and events typically generated by human beings as if they were generated by inanimate objects or abstract sources, English speakers might be giving these non-human entities a quasi-agentive status" [15, p. 464]. Analyzing performance on digital media, Silvio comes up with the notion of *animation* to discuss nonhuman (or even non-living) agents [17]. Cartoon characters are regarded as examples of 'dividuality': they are drawn by one person, voiced by another and their speech is written by yet another. This line of thought is furthered by Gershon's "neoliberal agency", where corporations are treated as individuals and humans are "simply smaller versions of corporations" [18, p. 541]. In other words, a cartoon character is perceived as a single actor; similarly, "actions done by or on behalf of a corporation may be interpreted as coming from a single rational agentive force" [19, p. 3].

Overall, the postmodernist worldview entails reviewing agency. The rationality behind the 'causation' premise of agency has been significantly undermined by the social constructivism theory, since ever-intensifying cross-cultural interactions of the late 20th – early 21st centuries have been uncovering culture-specific logics applied to cognize and explain historical events, interpersonal and psychological issues, etc. Psycholinguistic experiments reveal that "causal agent" is "a context-dependent construct, with both physical and social context playing important role" [20, p. 1]. Thus, insignificant changes in context may alter the perception of physical causality in visual cognition. No less impactful is social context, for example, cultural predispositions to self-effacing or self-serving biases arising from different concepts of the self: while East Asian societies emphasize interdependent ways of being, Western societies support independent notions of self [21]. Hence, people in independent societies tend to focus a single proximal cause for an event [22], pay less attention to distal consequences of events [23] and consider personal choice to be the most motivating [24], thus, "[W]hat it means to be an 'agent' does not appear to be a stable, universal property of events in the world" [20, p. 1].

Linguistic studies, therefore, started to elaborate on people's narratives, so-called "meta-agentive discourse", i.e., how people talk about their own and others' actions, how they lay blame or attribute responsi-

bility for events [9, p. 41]. In [25], the study of middle-class American's life stories reveals that this social group attributes meeting and falling in love to a considerable extent to fate and chance, whereas they view themselves as quite agentive in their professional life.

Analysis of meta-agentive discourse confirms that gender is another salient factor that shapes one's agency. Exploring young Nepalis' love letters, Ahearn notes that both male and female letters mix individualistic and fatalistic notions, female writing, however, emphasizes "more fatalistic notions, claiming that it was not possible to achieve what one wanted to life" [9, p. 43]. Male letters, on the other hand, assert that "any and all obstacles could be overcome" [9, p. 43]. Interestingly, the claim that "grammatical categories per se are able to convey social meanings" [26, p. 568] is convincingly supported both by corpus analysis and associative experiments: treated as "linguistic devices used to express actions and agency" [26, p. 567], verbs tend to evoke in speakers of Polish and German associations of stereotypically agentive social groups, namely men and young people [26, p. 566].

Finally, agency is one of the central issues of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) where it is defined as the ability to act and to bring about change [27] with Agent being "the person or the entity who/which stands behind change and causes it", i.e., Agent is "the doer of the action that affects the other participants" [28, p. 266] and embraces Actor, Sensor or any other participant functions in the transitivity mode. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, transitivity is important since "agency, state, process, and so on seem to be the basic categories in terms of which human beings present the world to themselves through language" [29, p. 74]. Nominalization, a case of agency mitigation, is analyzed then due to its effect to redirect "transitivity structures away from characterizing 'reality' in terms of actions taken by animate actors against specific participants and/or objects and toward inanimate agents and nondirected actions" [30, p. 491]. According to Fowler, nominalization "is a radical syntactic transformation of a clause, which has extensive structural consequences, and offers substantial ideological opportunities" [31, p. 80].

Since culture has a cognitive dimension that channels interpretations of people's actions, discussions of agency inevitably lead to the issues of knowledge and power brought up by Foucault [32]. Kockelman develops Foucauldian theory by showing how reasoning is carried out through signs and their meanings and how some communities' semiotic ideologies prevail over others [33]. The multiplicity of 'indexical orders' (Silverstein 2003) and one's simultaneous participation in several of those generate different meanings to the same action within each of the orders: in each indexical order, an agent is constructed anew and, since agency is bound with responsibility, it also presupposes laying blame. This makes agency one of the central issues of CDA: for example, the cause of frequent school shootings in the USA may be seen as resulting from lax gun control rather than shooters' personal accountability [34]. It is relevant here to return to the study by Formanowicz et al. [26], quoted above, where the researchers show how different social groups are granted different degrees or models of agency.

To accommodate the discourse factor in the agency definition, Ahearn interprets agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" [9, p. 28]. Drawing on this interpretation, *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology* defines agency as "the capacity for socially meaningful action" [19, p. 1] and relates agency to identity "theorized as an interactional accomplishment" and dependent

on one's capacity for social action [19, p. 1]. The concept of causation brings into the discussion Peircean understanding of indexicality, i.e., existential connections between phenomena or events [35, 286], which, according to Silverstein, determines the ways of context-construction through language [36]. For example, the use of the pronoun *we* rhetorically creates a group that contains the speaker and opposes this group to *them*. In other words, "agency and social meanings are co-constructive through the mechanism of indexicality" [19, p. 2]. In the long run, agency is assigned to participants (real or imaginary) according to "semiotic ideologies", that is, "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" [37, p. 419]. Thus, a recovery from an illness may be taken as indexing the interference of spirits, the patient's strong will, natural forces, or medicine. One may observe a host of diverse views on causation in the realm of politics, environmental, interpersonal issues, etc., which substantiates the assumption that "[A] truly non-universalizing, ethnographically rooted theory of agency must be agnostic toward what is or can be 'truly agentive': Agency in all its complexity refers both to the range of socioculturally mediated *acts* and also, interwoven, the possible *actors*. (...) Indexicality does not only 'open up' meaning to causality, but also to fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology" [19, p. 2–3].

Conclusion and further research. Initially associated with the subject of transitive verbs, agency has evolved into a complex notion of semantic and social salience. In Case Grammar, the Agent appeared as a semantic primitive and denoted an instigator of an action. As linguistic research expanded its scope to include extralingual factors that affect discourse, understanding of agency started to embrace as volition, controllability, ability to make change and to be evaluated. Emerging communication media and discourses have brought about new phenomena, such as divisibility of the Agent and 'neoliberal agency'. Studies in the field of Linguistic Anthropology and CDA have exposed multiple logics used to assign agency to participants of an event, which substantiates approaching agency as one's capacity to act in a socially meaningful way assessed within the framework of a culture and/or an ideology.

Bibliography:

1. Zhaboruke I. A., Boieva E. V. The grammatical homonyms of the English structure *be+ed*. *Науковий вісник Міжнародного гуманітарного університету*. Сер.: Філологія. 2025. № 71. С. 62–65. DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/2409-1154.2025.71.13>
2. Коломієць О.М., Головська І.В. Реконструкція синтаксичних елементів текстів професійного спрямування в англійській мові. *Науковий вісник Міжнародного гуманітарного університету*. Сер.: Філологія. 2025. № 67. С. 52–55. DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/2409-1154.2024.67.13>
3. Межов О.Г., Межова О.В. Сполучникова реалізація семантико-синтаксичних відношень причини у сучасних медіатекстах. *Науковий вісник Міжнародного гуманітарного університету*. Сер.: Філологія. 2025. № 72. С. 66–70. DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/2409-1154.2025.72.15>
4. Fillmore C. The Case for Case. *Universals in Linguistic Theory*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968. P. 1–88.
5. Cruse D.A. Some thoughts on agentivity. *Journal of linguistics*. 1973. # 9 (1). P. 11–23.
6. Dowty D. Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection. *Language*. 1991. Vol. 67, No. 3. P. 547–619.
7. Dixon R. M. W. *Ergativity*. Cambridge University Press, 1994. 271 p.
8. Comrie B. (1981). *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology: Syntax and Morphology*. Oxford: Blackwell and Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 264 p.

9. Ahearn, L. M. (2010). Agency and language. *Society and Language Use*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010. P. 28–48.
10. Межов О. Семантичні класи агентивних дієслів у граматичній системі сучасної англійської мови. Типологія та функції мовних одиниць. *Науковий журнал*. 2015. Vol. 1 (3). С. 126–136.
11. DeLancy S. Notes on agentivity and causation. *Studies in Language*. 1983. Vol. 18 (2). P. 181–213.
12. Silverstein M. Hierarchy of features and ergativity. In R.M.W. Dixon (ed.) *Grammatical Categories in Australian Languages*. New Jersey, USA: Humanities Press, Inc., 1976. P. 112–171.
13. Foley W.A. Information Structure. In K. Brown, J. Miller (eds.) & R.E. Asher (consulting ed.) *Concise Encyclopedia of Grammatical Categories*. Elsevier, 1999. P. 204–213.
14. Croft W. Syntactic Categories and Grammatical Relations. The Cognitive Organization of Information. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 328 p.
15. Duranti A. Agency in Language. In A. Duranti (Ed.) *A companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. P.451 – 473.
16. Bybee J., Perkins R., Pagliuca W. The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 398 p.
17. Silvio T. Animation: The New Performance? *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. 2010. Vol. 20 (2). P. 422–438. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1395.2010.01078.x
18. Gershon I. Neoliberal Agency. *Current Anthropology*. 2011. Vol. 52 (4). P. 537–555.
19. Parish A., Hall, K. Agency. In J.Stanlaw (Ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2021. P. 1–9. DOI: 10.1002/9781118786093.iela0008
20. Fausey C.M., Long B.L., Inamori A., Boroditsky L. Constructing agency: the role of language. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2010. Vol. 1 (162). P. 1–11. Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2010.00162
21. Markus H. R., Kitayama S. Models of agency: sociocultural diversity in the construction of action. In *The 49th Annual Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Crosscultural Differences in Perspectives on Self*, eds V. Murphy-Berman and J. Berman. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. P. 1–57.
22. Choi I., Dalal R., Kim-Prieto C., Park H. Culture and judgment of causal relevance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2003. Vol. 84. P. 46–59.
23. Maddux W. W., Yuki M. The “ripple effect”: cultural differences in perceptions of the consequences of events. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 2006. Vol. 32. P. 669–683.
24. Iyengar S. S., Lepper M. R. Rethinking the value of choice: a cultural perspective on intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1999. Vol. 76. P. 349–366.
25. McCollum C.C. The Cultural Patterning of Self-Understanding: A Cognitive-Pschoanalytic Approach to Middle-Class Americans' Life Stories. Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2000. 284 p.
26. Formanowicz, M, Roessel, J., Suitner, C., Maass, A. Verbs as linguistic markers of agency: The social side of grammar. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 2017. Vol. 47(5). P. 566–579. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2231
27. Gunn J. Agency. In S. T. Littlejohn & K. A. Foss (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of communication theory*. Sage Publications, 2009. P. 28–32.
28. Ghachem I. A Sociocognitive Approach to Agency Framing in David Cameron's 2010 Pre-election Discourse. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*. 2015. Vol. 7(2). P. 263–282.
29. Fowler R. Linguistic Criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 262 p.
30. Dunmire P. L. Preempting the future: rhetoric and ideology of the future in political discourse. *Discourse & Society*. 2005. Vol. 16(4). P. 481–513.
31. Fowler R. Language in the News. Discourse and Ideology in the Press. London: Routledge, 1998. 254 p.
32. Foucault M. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. 333 p.
33. Kockelman, P. Agency: The Relation Between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge. *Current Anthropology*. 2007. Vol. 48 (3). P. 375–401.
34. Strauss, C. Blaming for Columbine: Conceptions of Agency in the Contemporary United States. *Current Anthropology*. 2007. Vol. 48 (6). P. 807–832.
35. Peirce, C.S. “Of Reasoning in General.” In *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Volume 2, edited by Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958.
36. Silverstein, M. Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life. *Language & Communication*. 2003. Vol. 23 (3). P. 193–229.
37. Keane, W. Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things. *Language & Communication*. 2003. Vol. 23 (3–4). P. 409–425.

Алексеева І. Тлумачення агентивності: від теоретичної граматики до лінгвістичної антропології та дискурсивних досліджень

Анотація. Метою статті є простежити еволюцію терміна *агентивність* в лінгвістиці, починаючи з 1960-х років, коли поняття *агенса* появилось як один з семантичних примітивів у відмінковій граматиці Ч.Філлмора та позначало виконавця дії, до сучасних студій в галузі лінгвістичної антропології та дискурсивних досліджень. У статті виявлено, що поняття агентивності спочатку ґрунтувалося на формальних характеристиках, проявлених на рівні синтаксису, проте потім відбувся поступовий зсув, у результаті якого все більше уваги було приділено позамовним (психологічним, культурно-специфічним або ідеологічним) факторам. Таким чином, термін *агенса* з'явився на позначення підмета перехідних дієслів на противагу додатковій та підметовій неперехідних дієслів. Подальший аналіз семантичних властивостей окремих перехідних дієслів, а також іменникової категорії істота–неістота виявив необхідність урахування лексичного значення для визначення учасника події як агенса. Морфологічні властивості вербалізаторів агенса підсумовано в таблиці істотності, де займенники першої та другої особи виступають типовими засобами на позначення агенса порівняно з займенниками третьої особи, іменниками на позначення істоти та неістоти. Фактор істоти як характеристики агенса був доповнений іншими, а саме волею (volition) та контролем (control), що свідчило про те, що агентивність навряд чи може бути об'єктивною характеристикою. Іншими словами, інтерпретація одного з учасників події як агенса є радше суб'єктивною думкою мовця. Досягнення лінгвістичної антропології, які виявили, наскільки по-різному люди в різних культурах (зокрема, тих, які займають різні позиції в континуумі «колективізм–індивідуалізм») тлумачать події з точки зору каузації та, отже, відповідальності та контролю з боку учасників, поглибили розуміння поняття агентивності. Дискурсивні дослідження сучасної опосередкованої комунікації, в свою чергу, сприяють усвідомленню зв'язку між агенсом та ідентичністю, в той час як критичний аналіз політичного дискурсу розглядає агентивність як здатність здійснювати соціокультурні зміни, причому схильність до ролі агенса та інтерпретація причинно-наслідкових відношень залежить від світогляду, сформованого ідеологією спільноти.

Ключові слова: агентивність, агенса, теоретична граматика, лінгвістична антропологія, дискурсивні дослідження.

Дата першого надходження рукопису
до видання: 22.08.2025

Дата прийнятого до друку рукопису
після рецензування: 19.09.2025

Дата публікації: 21.10.2025