

## LEXICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SERIAL KILLER CHARACTER'S DISCOURSE IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

**Nytspol Viktoriia Ihorivna,**

*Candidate of Philological Sciences*

*Senior Lecturer of the department of foreign languages  
and translation*

*Vasyl Stephanyk Precarpathian National university*

*vika.dandelion@gmail.com*

*orcid.org/0000-0002-9531-2183*

Lexical analysis has always been a productive way to study discourse through the semiotic nature of the word and its ability to function as a link between language and reality. The **purpose** of the article is to explore the lexical level of the discourse of a serial killer character in order to reveal their psychological features and prove their authenticity in comparison with the lexicon research of real serial killers. This study is relevant because the number of thrillers with serial killers in American literature is growing every year, but the discourse of these characters is poorly studied and requires more attention from linguists. The article uses such **research methods** as the method of lexical and semantic analysis of language units to study the features of language nominations; method of semantic fields, for grouping language units according to their thematic affiliation in microfields; associative method for the distribution of language units to the corresponding microfields; structural method for the separation of units, their classification and interpretation.

**Results.** In the process of lexical analysis of the discourse of the serial killers characters, the words of the characters were divided into three main groups: words denoting mental activity, psychological needs, physiological activity and security. These groups were divided into semantic fields in order to facilitate the process of research. The analysis showed that the largest group of words in most discourses (except for two characters) is a group denoting physiological activity and safety, which corresponds to a study of the lexicon of real serial killers conducted by J. Hancock, which shows that the most important for the life of serial killers is biological component. The lexicon of the two characters (Lecturer and Claiborne), which differ from others by the predominance of words denoting mental activity, can be explained by their high educational and professional level, which shows their high IQ, which is also a feature of real serial killers.

Thus, we can **conclude** that the authors were able to portray the characters plausibly through their lexicon.

**Key words:** discourse, lexicon, semantic field, term, character.

## ЛЕКСИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ДИСКУРСУ ПЕРСОНАЖА СЕРІЙНОГО ВБИВЦІ В АМЕРИКАНСЬКІЙ ХУДОЖНІЙ ПРОЗІ ХХ СТОЛІТТЯ

**Ницполь Вікторія Ігорівна,**

*кандидат філологічних наук,*

*старший викладач кафедри іноземних мов і перекладу  
Прикарпатського Національного університету імені  
Василя Стефаника*

*vika.dandelion@gmail.com*

*orcid.org/0000-0002-9531-2183*

Лексичний аналіз завжди був продуктивним способом вивчення дискурсу через семіотичну природу слова та його здатність функціонувати як сполучна ланка між мовою та реальністю. Ця стаття має на **меті** дослідити лексичний рівень дискурсу персонажа серійного вбивці, щоб розкрити його психологічні особливості та довести достовірність та правдоподібність змалювання його образу в порівнянні з дослідженнями лексику справжніх серійних убивць. Таке дослідження є актуальним, оскільки

в американській літературі з кожним роком зростає кількість трилерів, де ключовими фігурами є серійні вбивці, а от дискурс цих персонажів є маловивченим і вимагає більшої уваги лінгвістів.

У статті використані такі **методи** дослідження, як метод лексико-семантичного аналізу мовних одиниць для вивчення особливостей мовних номінацій; метод семантичних полів, для групування мовних одиниць за їх тематичною приналежністю в мікрополя; асоціативний метод для розподілу мовних одиниць до відповідних мікрополів; структурний метод для виокремлення одиниць, їх класифікації та інтерпретації.

**Результати.** У процесі лексичного аналізу дискурсу персонажів серійних вбивць слова персонажів було розділено на три основні групи: слова, що позначають розумову діяльність, психологічні потреби, фізіологічну активність та безпеку. Ці групи були поділені на семантичні поля, щоб полегшити процес вивчення. Аналіз показав, що найбільша група слів у більшості дискурсів (крім двох персонажів) – це група, що позначає фізіологічну активність та безпеку, що відповідає дослідженню лексикону справжніх серійних вбивць, проведеному Дж. Хенкоком, яке показує, що найважливішим для життя серійних вбивць є біологічний компонент. Лексикон двох персонажів (Лектор і Клейборн), що відрізняються від інших перевагою слів, які позначають розумову діяльність, можна пояснити їхнім високим освітнім та професійним рівнем. Це засвідчує їхній високий коефіцієнт інтелекту, що також є особливістю справжніх серійних вбивць.

Отже, можна зробити **висновки**, що авторам вдалося зобразити портрети персонажів правдоподібно через їх лексикон, що співвідноситься з дослідженнями лексикону реальних серійних вбивць. Завдяки лексичному аналізу дискурсу вдалося розкрити психологічні особливості характерів персонажів.

**Ключові слова:** дискурс, лексикон, семантичне поле, термін, персонаж.

## Introduction

Lexical analysis has always been a productive way to study discourse due to the semiotic nature of the word and its ability to function as a link between language and reality. This paper aims at investigating the lexical level of the serial killer character's discourse in order to reveal their psychological features and to prove their credibility in comparison with the real serial killers. The research focuses on some of the most popular books by American writers published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, viz., *Misery* by Stephen King; *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis; *Silence of the lambs* by Thomas Harris; *Psycho*, *Psycho 2*, and *Psycho House* by Robert Bloch; *Along came a spider* by James Patterson and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmiths. The topicality of the proposed study is proved by the "popularity" of serial killers theme in fiction and by the fact that the serial killer character's discourse has been rather narrowly investigated in linguistics.

## Review of literature

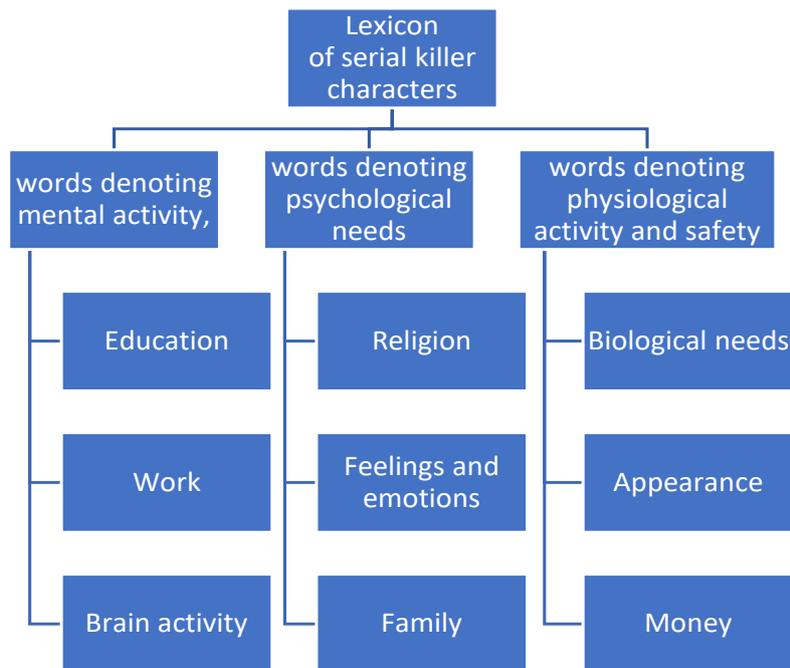
Discourse is a difficult notion to determine as a notion; therefore its different definitions can be found. According to the *Dictionary of Semiotics*, discourse refers to the interaction between "the thematic dimension, relating to the abstract values actualized in an utterance" (Martin, 2000). The French linguist M. Foucault argues that discourse establishes ways to identify, understand, and manage different subjects (Foucault, 1981). The Dutch scholar Teun A. van Dijk understands discourse not just as a process of making a "coherent semantic representation"; he underlines the importance of building a mental model of objects, people, actions and events. He thinks that our knowledge is especially used to construct such models and understanding of discourse depends on our ability to construe them (Van Dijk, 2010). The French structural linguist E. Benveniste thinks that discourse is the language put into action (Foucault, 1981). Taking into account the mentioned ideas, we perceive discourse as a complex notion that reflects speakers' knowledge through their language in communicative situations.

The article deals with the lexical level of the serial killer character's discourse in order to get more information about their background, psychological state, and features. To achieve this goal, first, we need to concentrate on the investigations based on the real serial killers. According to psychological studies, serial killers are divided into organized and disorganized types, where killers of organized type are characterized by high IQ, egocentrism, lack of emotions (Cleckley, 1982), and family problems.

The serial killers’ language was studied by such American scholars as J. Hancock, M. T. Woodworth, and S. Porter. They found out that the lexical level of killers’ discourse contains more words denoting physiological needs of organism than words with mental or spiritual meanings (Hancock, 2013). Their work concluded that biological factors are more important than social ones in a killer’s life.

### Results and Discussion

Studying the lexical level of the serial killer character’s discourse we decided to group the lexicon according to the characters’ physiological and psychological needs and activities to understand their life preferences and to prove the credibility of their portrait in comparison with the real killers studied by J. Hancock, M. T. Woodworth, and S. Porter. We paid attention to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in Kremer’s interpretation, which includes physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Kremer, 2013). We decided to combine physiological needs and safety into one group as they are closely connected. We also referred love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization to psychological needs and singled out the mental activity as most serial killers of organized type are characterized by high IQ and it is important to understand the role of intellect in their life. We simplified Maslow’s hierarchy and added mental activity, so our division of needs and activities includes mental activity, physiological needs, and psychological needs and safety. As our focus is on the lexicon, we paid attention to the words denoting the mentioned needs and activities and also subdivided these groups into semantic fields of words, verbalizing these needs (see the scheme 1).



Scheme 1. The serial killer characters’ lexicon of needs and activities

Our lexical analysis proved that the most numerous is the group of words denoting physiological activity and the least used were the words denoting psychological needs (see Table 1).

The table shows that **the words denoting mental activity** in most cases come second in their number after those denoting physiological needs and safety. The exceptions are Hannibal’s and Claiborne’s discourses. They use a lot of words from medical terminology, which belongs, from our point of view, to the semantic field of education as they get knowledge of these terms from universities and books in the process of getting educated. In Lector’s discourse we can find such medical terms as *phrenology*, *circumlocution*, *asphyxia*, *hebephrenic*, etc which can prove his high professional level as a doctor

and there are also words from other fields: *imago, pupa, interrogative, subjunctive* that can illustrate his broad outlook on life. Here is an example from Claiborne’s discourse: “*But who’s Zander?*” “*A recent arrival. Tentative diagnosis, involuntional melancholia*” (Bloch, 1982). Claiborne answers to a nun’s question with psychiatric terms “*Tentative diagnosis, involuntional melancholia*”, which can be too difficult for an ordinary person to understand. He may use this consciously to underline his knowledge and to show his superiority.

Table 1

**The serial killer characters’ lexicon of needs and activities**

Character	Book / Author	Words denoting mental activity	Words denoting spiritual needs	Words denoting physiological activity and safety	Total number of words
Adam Claiborne	<i>Psycho 2</i> by Robert Bloch	649	187	571	1407
Annie Wilkes	<i>Misery</i> by Stephen King	627	202	686	1515
Hank Gibbs	<i>Psycho House</i> by Robert Bloch	614	208	635	1457
Hannibal Lector	<i>Silence of the lambs</i> by Thomas Harris	654	198	568	1420
Gary Soneji / Murphy	<i>Along came a spider</i> by James Patterson	517	264	632	1413
Norman Bates	<i>Psycho</i> by Robert Bloch	521	314	594	1429
Patrick Bateman	<i>American Psycho</i> by Bret Easton Ellis	460	201	781	1442
Tom Ripley	<i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i> by Patricia Highsmiths	612	211	641	1464

The least number of words denoting mental activity is noticed in Patrick Bateman’s discourse. The semantic field of work is the most numerous here. For example: “*So, I start, crossing my legs. “Don’t you want to know what I do” ... “No.” Sabrina smiles, takes this as a cue and agrees. “No, not really”. I stare at the two of them for a minute before recrossing my legs and sighing, very irritated: “Well, I work on Wall Street. At Pierce & Pierce”* (Ellis, 1991). The verb *work* shows the process including mental activity; the name of the street – *Wall Street* – connotes the place of his work; and the proper name *Pierce & Pierce* is the name of the company where Patrick is employed. Bateman wants to speak about his job even if it is not interesting for his interlocutors, which proves his egocentrism.

Hank Gibbs also mentions his work in the process of communication. Gibbs is a reporter and he has got a lot of words connected with his job: “*Minute a big story breaks in a small town, every stringer in the state shows up, then it’s radio and the television crews. They’ve got to deal with the local lawmen but that means waiting for a handout or a personally delivered ‘no comment’. So the first thing they do is track down the editor of the local paper and try to get a story out of him*” (Bloch, 1982). In this abstract we notice words denoting people working in the sphere of media (*stringer, editor, radio and the television crews*), the process of writing reports (*handout, no comment, to get a story*) and the type of written material (*the local paper*). We refer all of these words to the semantic field of work as they connote Gibb’s way of earning money.

Soneji is a Maths teacher, but he does not mention this very often. Sometimes he speaks about it as the way to fame: “*I want to be the scariest man in America. That’s why I work in the capital. I’m Gary. Don’t you remember me, Viv?*” (Patterson, 92). In this example, we refer the words *work* and *capital* (as it connotes the place of work) to the field of work and the word *remember* to the field of brain activity, so we can say that words denoting mental activity appear quite often but they are used, in most cases, to support his main goal – fame, which in our opinion, belongs to the spiritual needs of personality.

There is a high percentage of words with mental meaning in Annie Wilkes' and Tom Ripley's discourses. It can be explained by their often use of such words as *know* (Tom – 108, Annie – 126) and *think* (Tom – 145, Annie – 91) which belong to the semantic field of brain activity. Here is an example from Annie's discourse: “*I know you know who Andy Pomeroy was, because I know you've read my book. I suppose that I sort of hoped you would read it, you know; otherwise, why would I have left it out? But I made sure, you know — I make sure of everything*” (King, 1988). First three times *know* is used in its direct meaning “to have information in your mind” (Summers, 2003), and as this word occurs so often within one sentence it results in tautology that can show poor vocabulary of a speaker, which is also proved by the usage of the utterance “*you know*”, that functions in this context as the filler, does not have full semantic meaning and is used for combining thoughts.

Norman Bates' discourse is not replete with words denoting mental activity, but there are some examples: “*Maybe that was part of my problem*”, Norman said. “*You know what happened to me—the transvestite thing*” (Bloch, 1982). The words *problem*, *know*, *transvestite thing* belong to the semantic field of brain activity as the first one means “something difficult to deal with” that requires mental activity and the last words connote the problem.

High concentration of words from semantic fields work, education and brain activity indicates the characters' intellectual skills that correspond to the characteristic features of the real serial killers of an organized type.

**Words denoting psychological needs**, from our point of view, include semantic fields of religion, feelings, emotions and family. These words are the smallest in number in all analyzed serial killer characters' discourses.

The semantic field of religion is relatively numerous in Patrick Bateman's discourse, but words from this field are used as exclamations in most cases and do not mean his faith. Here is an example: “*Oh gosh,*” I say, “*hope I'm not blushin.*” “*Actually, where do you go, Bateman?*” Van Patten asks “*For a tan*” (Ellis, 1991). Phrase *Oh gosh* expresses a shade of irritation at the compliment. The word *gosh* is a slang variant of the word *God* and is used in the function of exclamation.

The semantic field of feelings and emotions is the smallest, which can be the proof that serial killers are wearing the “Mask of Sanity” (term suggested by the American psychiatrist Hervey M. Cleckley (Cleckley, 1982), which means that a psychopath is devoid of real feelings and speaks about them just to look normal in society.

Hannibal Lector uses emotional words but mostly in relation to other people or to express some kind of philosophical thoughts: “*Life's too slippery for books, Clarice; anger appears as lust, lupus presents as hives*” (Harris, 1988: 137). Lector compares emotions *anger* and *lust* with such diseases as *lupus* (“a chronic inflammatory disease that occurs when your body's immune system attacks your own tissues and organs” (Summers D., 2003)) and *hives* (“an outbreak of swollen, pale red bumps or plaques on the skin” (Summers D., 2003)), where *anger* corresponds to a very difficult disease *lupus* that can be misinterpreted as a symptom – *hives*. So, it means that, from Lector's point of view, people mix up such notions as anger and lust where anger is much more serious.

Gary Soneji also expresses his feelings and emotions but it does not mean that they are true: “*Gary thought about it carefully before he said a word. Then he said, “I love you so much, Missy. I love you and Roni more than I love my life itself.” Gary lied, and he knew it was a pretty good one. Extremely well told, well acted. What he wanted to do was to laugh in their goddamn faces. What he wanted to do most was to kill all of them*” (Patterson, 1992: 78). The author's narrative shows the real Gary's face and real wishes (“*to kill all of them*”) that are hiding behind his flattering phrases “*I love you so much, Missy. I love you and Roni more than I love my life itself*”. He lies pretty well using the intensification “*so much*” and the comparison “*more than I love my life itself*” in order to his feelings, but tautological repetition of the word *love* sounds unnatural and can reveal the lie.

Claiborne rarely speaks about feelings or emotions and in most cases they are the means of courtesy than real feeling: “*Sorry to keep you waiting*” (Bloch, 1982). Adam uses the word *sorry* not to express his feeling of sadness or disappointment because of keeping his interlocutor waiting, but in order to be polite.

Hank Gibbs sometimes gives instructions concerning feelings to other people: “*Don’t feel guilty. The same thing happens to me, and that’s why I wanted to get away*” (Bloch, 1990: 213). This example shows Hank’s reaction to guilt – he simply avoids it. He advises just not to feel it. That means that he does not worry about things and tries not to blame himself.

The serial killer characters sometimes mention the members of their family that illustrates the semantic field “Family”. Norman Bates’ discourse is a vivid example of verbalizing this semantic field as he speaks instead of his mum and he also speaks about his mum very often: “*Oh, yes. I brought Mother back home with me. That was the exciting part, you see-going out to the cemetery at night and digging up the grave*” (Bloch, 1956: 197). The word *Mother* is capitalized to underline its importance and it is used in the meaning of a person, but in the context it is a dead body.

Annie Wilkes often uses quotations of her mother, who died 20 years ago. For example: “*My mother had a motto, Paul, and I live by it. “Once nasty, never neat,” she used to say*” (King, 1988: 163). Annie follows her mother’s motto “*Once nasty, never neat*” but she exaggerates the meaning as she tries very hard to wash everything and her attitude to the process of tidying her house sometimes looks like psychological deviation.

Difficult family situation and poor expression of emotions that were noticed in all the serial killer characters’ discourses, meet the general characteristics of real serial killers who usually have family problems and wear “The Mask of Sanity”. Their beliefs are quite controversial but using religious words in context shows their interest in religion but not real belief.

**Words denoting physiological activity and safety** are the most numerous in all discourses except Claiborne’s and Lector’s. Patrick Bateman is the one with the largest number of words in all semantic fields of this group. The semantic field money is singled out as money is necessary for satisfying the needs of physical and economical safety. There are a lot of words from the semantic field money in Patrick’s discourse: “*Or an AR-15. You’d like it, Evelyn: it’s the most expensive of guns, but worth every penny*” (Ellis, 1991: 306). Bateman very often evaluates things depending on their price. He chooses the most expensive and the example proves this. The words *expensive*, *worth* and *penny* are included into the thematic group of money and illustrate his life focus on wealth. Patrick also has a large vocabulary of food and alcohol that belongs to the semantic field of biological needs. Here is some examples of alcohol variety: *beer* (3 times), *champagne* (4 times), *brandy*, *cognac*, *chardonnay*, *sorbet* (6 times), and *peach schnapps*. These words denoting different kinds of alcohol drinks can reveal his alcohol addiction.

Gary Soneji uses words denoting physiological activity even with such an abstract word as *fame*: “*What was fame really like? How did it smell? How did it taste? What did fame look like close up?*” (Patterson, 1992: 7). Gary is interested in the “appearance” (“*What did fame look like close up?*”) of fame in its “*smell*” and “*taste*” that makes his language metaphorical but at the same time proves his focus on biological properties even of an abstract notion.

Claiborne also takes care of physiological needs of his own and other people’s organisms: “*Then I won’t bother you. Have a good night’s rest*” (Bloch, 1982: 228). He understands the importance of rest at night and does not want to bother anybody that can show his politeness as well.

The semantic field of appearance is widely presented in almost all discourses. Here is an example from Hank Gibbs and Amy’s conversation: “*Far as I’m concerned your hair looks great the way it is, but if you want to fiddle around with it, bring a comb and a mirror*” (Bloch, 1990: 151). Hank compliments Amy, saying that her “*hair looks great*” so it means that he pays attention to other

people's appearance and he also uses words *comb* and *mirror* that are the objects for making oneself beautiful that proves his interest in good looking.

Norman Bates describes his own appearance: “*I was a sickly child. Wore glasses for reading, right up until a few years ago*” (Bloch, 1956: 65). Saying that he was “*a sickly child*” he wants to evoke the compassion for his personality with the intention to manipulate the nun. He adds that he “*wore glasses for reading*” to make this impression of pity stronger.

The fact that the group of words denoting physiological activity and safety is the most numerous within characters' lexicon meets Hancock's investigation based on the real serial killers language and proves the credibility of the characters' image in fiction literature.

### Conclusion

Lexical analysis of the serial killer characters' discourse was made by dividing the characters' words into three main groups: the words denoting mental activity, spiritual needs, and physiological activity and safety. These groups were subdivided into the semantic fields to make the process of studying easier. The analysis has shown that the biggest group of words in most discourses (except two characters) is the group denoting physiological activity and safety that meets J. Hancock's investigation, which shows that the most important for serial killers' lives is the biological component. The lexicon of two characters (Lector and Claiborne) that differ from others by the dominance of the words denoting mental activity can be explained by their high educational and professional level that show their high IQ, which is also a feature of the real serial killers. So, we can conclude that the authors managed to depict the true characters' portraits through their lexicon.

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