

American Dream Revisited: A Media Discourse Representation in Cognitive-linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

Considered in cognitive-linguistic perspective, "American Dream" is represented in media discourse as a stereotype that embodies the ideal of happiness in a prosperous democratic society. The research methodology rests on the premise of a cognitive-linguistic approach to the study of sociocultural stereotypes, which are seen as complex phenomena of social and cultural experience, manifested in behavioural, material, and verbal codes. Methodological tools of discursive and corpus analysis proved the variability of meaning of the stereotype. In the course of time, it shows semantic changes, conditioned by socio-economic and cultural factors. Empirical study eventuates in distinguishing three periods that correlate with the transformation of the stereotype. The period of formation outlines the ideal of freedom and equality. The next period, which started in the 1950s, manifested changes toward obtaining happiness only in virtue of wealth. In recent years, "American Dream" is being associated more with freedom of choice than mere financial success.

Keywords: stereotyping; American Dream; media discourse; cognitive-linguistic approach; corpus analysis; semantic change

1. Introduction

Stereotyping is a process of formation, anchoring and propagation of stereotypes that are considered "the set of values, attitudes and behaviours shared by a group and passed on by learning" (Davies 2003, p. 68). Stereotypes are emotionally perceived and evaluated beliefs, which are shared by the majority and spread in communication.

As cognitive units, stereotypes do not exist separately. Interacting, they form a hierarchically organized system, the apex of which is an ideal that has ideological significance for the nation. Such is "American Dream", in one way or another, known all over the world. This stereotype embodies the complex of fixed ideas about the world that determine a way of life and interpretation of experience, thus it functions as the gauge of human achievements in American culture. Through means of cinematography and social media, the stereotype of "American Dream" has significantly influenced the assessment of not only personal success, but national ideas in other cultures. It is expressed in a compressed verbal form of an idiom, i.e. a group of words producing a new meaning, not deducible from each of the words in the group. Having a high degree of sustainability and prevalence in media discourse, the form of it has been used to create new idioms. Such is *Chinese Dream*, which denotes a concept of the great revival of the Chinese

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nation, or *Ukrainian Dream* that appeared in the period of the Revolution of Dignity in the meaning of a cherished aspiration of Ukrainians to have freedom within fair laws of the country. *Australian Dream* is the wish of owning property. The great appeal of the stereotypic ideal "American Dream" to different cultures, as well as massive criticism arisen by it in American culture, has conditioned the research interest from different scientific perspectives.

1.1. Literature review

Huge number works were devoted to research of "American Dream" in sociology, social psychology, philosophy, culture studies, and other related disciplines. In sociology, "American Dream" is seen from socio-economic perspective as the power of wealth (Johnson 2006). In Cultural Sociology, "American Dream" is considered a personal fulfilment, "a Dream of Upward Mobility, fame and fortune" that compel even more if achieved without obvious effort (Cullen 2004, p. 9). The basic research interest resides in ways of adjustment of immigrants in the United States in compliance with "American Dream" pattern (Mahler1995; Cid & Leigh 2011; Pottie-Sherman 2013; Osborne 2016).

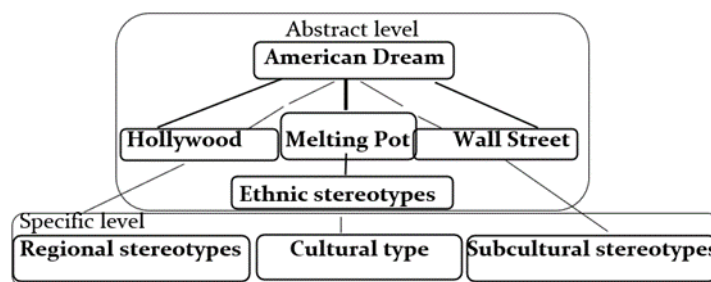
"American Dream" was analyzed in numerous works in studies of American prose (Harris & Harris1972; Keshmiri 2016; Popova 2017) and poetry (Dualé 2018). As it was shown, "American Dream" in literary discourse represents the "Great-American-Success illusion" (Harris & Harris1972, p. 60).

In Cultural Linguistic studies, applied corpus-driven discourse analysis proved "American Dream" is the central idea to the American national identity. It is the discursively constructed concept, which is undergoing changes in the 21th century (Hou 2019).

1.2. Research questions

Regardless of huge bulk of works in humanitarian paradigm, "American Dream" has not been yet studied in cognitive-linguistic perspective as sociocultural stereotype represented in media discourse. Created by verbal and visual means, media discourse is the communication domain reflecting the changes in stereotypes. This research of media discourse is conducted in "top down approach", beginning with a broadly defined category", which is a stereotypic ideal, that is examined in view of "the range of linguistic features" (Crystal 2003, p. 286). Media representation demonstrates the semantic and pragmatic changes of its verbal form that correspond cognitive process of transformation in the stereotype. The interpretation of linguistic means proceeds from a wide historical and cultural context.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of American sociocultural stereotypes



In the research, "American Dream" is considered the sociocultural stereotype of the highest level of the hierarchy of stereotypes in American culture. This abstract conventional idea influences the appearance of sociocultural stereotypes as they are formed according to assessment pattern fixed in "American Dream".

The aim of this research is to describe the changes that happen with the stereotypic ideal "American Dream" during the 19th-21st centuries. The study of changes in the dominant ideal of the national culture will assist in interpretation of other, more specific stereotypes of the hierarchy.

2. Methodology of research

The procedure of analysis is based on a "top-down approach", i.e. onomastic approach, which is the most suitable to describe semantic changes in "American Dream".

2.1. Theoretical background

The research methodology rests on the premise of cognitive-linguistic approach to study of stereotypes, which are seen as complex phenomena of social and cultural experience, manifested in behavioural, material, and verbal codes. A lexical item, i.e. a word or an idiom, codifies the information about a sociocultural stereotype (Bartmiński 1995, p. 7). Connotations of the word make a stereotype prominent as "social meaning" in a definite context (Coulmas 1981, p. 14). Stereotypes are reflected on a syntactic level of the language in forms of judgements about certain features of stereotyped objects (Quasthoff 1978, p. 28), pragmatic predispositions and attitudes (Lyubymova 2020, p. 86). The study of stereotypes in a cognitive-linguistic perspective is aimed at description of linguistically fixed knowledge of the social world and mechanisms of its evaluation. The analysis considers extralinguistic information about cultural traditions and historical background of stereotypes' formation and driving forces of their changes.

2.2. Research procedure

The basic method is a discursive analysis that enables interpretation of meaning of the idiom American Dream within the sociocultural contexts. Interpretation of utterances involves investigation of contextual assumptions and implicatures that refine and adjust the comprehension (Wilson 2019). The research procedure includes contextual-semantic and comparative analysis of changes that are reflected in semantics and pragmatics of the idiom. Application of descriptive method is determined by the task to systematize the received information of a represented in the media discourse stereotype.

To finalize the discursive study, corpus analysis is applied. It is a verification tool that validates introspective findings within the framework of cognitive linguistics (Lyubymova 2019). Implemented hybrid approach to the study of cognitive characteristics of linguistically represented stereotypes might provide important support for researchers interested in studying the cognitive nature of linguistic phenomena of stereotyping.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Media representation of American Dream

The constituents of the idiom American Dream point to national affiliation of mental image of the great desire, attainment of which gives the feeling of contentment and happiness. The new

meaning produced by the idiom refers to a mental representation of happiness outlined in American culture. The history of a deeply rooted into a collective consciousness national idea of happiness has begun in times of signing the Declaration of Independence of the United States. It emphasized the main moral standards, regulating social relations: *We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men created equal, that they are endowed, by the Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* (In Congress 1776). Achieving happiness is obviously connected with recognized civil rights, among which the basic is Liberty. Thus, a cherished aspiration of the Founding Fathers was freedom that guarantees the achievement of wonderful ideal of American Dream. The Pursuit of Happiness in the famous phrase was transformed into property, without due process of law in the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution. The Amendment guarantees the enjoyment of all rights and freedoms by everyone, free enterprise and self-expression, which are necessary facilities to achieve personal success, traditionally associated with "American Dream".

In the middle of the 19th century, the main principles of civic and religious freedoms (*the righteous principles of civil and religious liberty*) were recognized by media as achievement of morally correct and reasonable system of beliefs that distinguishes American nation from the rest of the world (*doctrine we proudly told the world*) (Ephemera New Hampshire 1844). These beliefs were acknowledged a regulation tool of a public life in America.

To the end of the 19th century, the pursuit of happiness acquired the meaning of search of financial security. Therefore, the American Dream has started to be associated with well-being. The example of acquired meaning is expressed in the article of 1897 that tells the story of American actress, who, because of her marriage to a powerful man, lost her possession of the manor in California: *With her marriage to Esterhazy ends her dear American dream, probably the sweetest dream of her...* (Threvathan1897). Later, she eagerly tried to return her dear property. She sought legal solution of her affair and due to equality before the law, her precious dream came true. The desirable possession of her was called *Elysium* – a state of perfect happiness. Thus, the implementation of her American Dream gave her an ideal happiness.

Since 1848, when gold was found in America, the stereotype of the "American dream" became to be associated with opportunity to get riches quickly. Americans and emigrants of all ages rushed to California in search of their happiness: *Old men, as well as the middle-aged and young, have golden visions of wealth before them, and are preparing to try their luck in this far-distant land* (National Intelligencer 1848). Representing the image of a happy future (*golden visions of wealth*), the United States was perceived *a land of brilliant opportunities* (Providence Journal 1917).

At the end of the 19th and early 20th century, the rapid development of the American economy and proudly declared to the world standards lifted high caused a significant flow of emigrants from Europe in search of happiness. *The American dream spread through Europe* (Greeley-Smith 1917). European immigrants want *free realization of their abilities and ultimate religious freedom* (Evening Star 1921). "American Dream" became an immigrants' dream of better life and an example of realization of dreams of people, whose rights are protected by law: *great expression of human liberty that all the peoples of the world may see realized in our political ideal – the dream of true manhood protected in its political expression* (The Topeka Daily Capital 1903). The

elevated style of this statement is conveyed by semantics of the significance (*great*), perfection (*ideal*) and universality (*the dream of true manhood*) of the stereotype. However, the responsibility of attaining "American Dream" was declared an individual affair:

Do dreams come true?

Sure they do!

But their realization depends on you (The Liberal Democrat 1917).

The ability to act independently in order to achieve the desired success is associated with the principle of individualism, favoring freedom of action for people whose civil rights are not limited in the country.

Although the idiom *American Dream* is found in American press since the 19th century, its regular use in media discourse begins in 1931 with publication of the book "Epic of America" by T. Adams. In the book the idiom *American Dream* defines a public order that allows every person to succeed: *It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position* (Adams 1931, 415–416). Adams emphasizes the social importance of the "American Dream", which is not reduced only to the material benefit (*It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely*). This was particularly relevant for the time of publication of the book, when the country was struggling with severe economic crisis. Twice mentioned the word *each* in the phrase *each man and each woman* emphasizes the universal character of ability of self-realization in America that do not depend on gender or social background (*regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position*). America is recognized as the country where social barriers do not interfere with the person's success (*unhindered by the barriers*). Adams underlines freedom as the main component of the meaning of *American Dream*. The most complete realization of a person is possible only in America – the country where *dream has been realized more fully in actual life... than anywhere else*.

In the 1950s, during the period of post-war prosperity, the grandeur of a noble desire of freedom of "American Dream" – *a dream for which people live, fight and die* (Fort Worth Star-Telegram 1959) was being changed to a commonplace preoccupation with material well-being. That is why the stereotype of "American Dream" was seen as *the vision of good pay* (Time Magazine 1955). Financially secured life becomes the main and all-consuming aspiration of Americans. "American dream" embodied this *universal appeal* (Time Magazine 1957). The stereotype determines the life style of Americans aimed at achieving success. This idea was made prominent by the President D.D. Eisenhower, who declared that *to live up to American Dream – becoming leaders* (The Morning News 1956). A leader is a strong, determined, and competitive individual that corresponds archetypical American hero. It is he (she) that archives success in the pursuit of "American Dream".

The ability to achieve success in the society with equal rights for all citizens was the main principle of the presidential policy of J. F. Kennedy. Highly praised by M.L. King, the draft law of Civil Rights Act of 1963 was to end segregation in public facilities and schools. In his speech, King noted *the order carries the whole nation forward to the realization of American dream* (Clinton

Daily Journal and Public 1962). Thus, equality is a component of meaning of the idiom American Dream that became prominent in the times of social unrest of the 1960s.

In the early 1970s, the deterioration of the economic situation in the country causes unpopular actions of President R.M. Nixon to stop inflation. It was estimated as the end of "American Dream": *President Nixon raised the curtain on what may be the last act of a play entitled, "The Great American Dream". The something good that is passing... is the great American dream of a free economy, free enterprise system ...Mr. Nixon has imposed "90-day"freeze on prices, wages and rents* (Kilpatrick 1971). Appealing to emotions of Americans to the cherished "American Dream", the author wants to cause indignation by presidential control of entrepreneurs, which is seen as infringement on the core principle of American economy.

Despite all financial problems in the country, media discourse claims full satisfaction of Americans with their financial state: *Most Americans view their personal situations as reflecting "overall contentment and assumption of fulfilment of much of the traditional American dream"* (Time Magazine 1971). The life style of Americans almost fully corresponds the stereotypic ideal of "American Dream" in the sense, which became traditional in several decades of economic stability.

The fulfilment of "American Dream" requires at least possessing immovable property: *Our home is part of the American dream, on a lesser plane* (Time Magazine 1982). However, in the late 1970s, the acquisition of a private accommodation became an unrealizable dream: *As the single-family house becomes a more prohibitively expensive American dream, more young families are forced to live in apartments* (Time Magazine 1978).

In media discourse of the 1980s, homeownership remains an urgent problem for Americans: *Americans are still struggling to make the dream of property ownership come true* (Arizona Daily Star 1989), that is why it is seen an intrinsic part of the American Dream (The Star-Democrat 1989). Struggling with all financial obstacles to buy own house is declared by media *truly the American dream* (Arizona Daily Star 1989). The possession of property gives Americans *a pride and sense of well being in knowing that the home and land on which it stands is really ours* (Arizona Daily Star 1989).

The attainment of "American Dream" is connected with a highly appreciated in American culture pattern of upward social mobility. A person of any social status, even born in a poor family, working diligently, can make a career to realize the "American dream": *His own life is an advertisement for the American Dream: born poor, he ... won a bachelor's degree from Harvard and a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago, and went on to a distinguished teaching career* (Henry 1981). Comfortable life and financial security as evidence of achievements give a feeling of happiness, i.e. realization of "American Dream".

Advances in technologies in the 1990s and stable economic growth added substantial wealth to many Americans. However, for the majority of people "American Dream" *is not acquiring hundreds of millions of dollars. For average Americans, the fantasy of suddenly becoming enormously, improbably rich is difficult to construct* (Trillin 2000). *Elusiveness of the American Dream* (Buechner 2003) emphasizes its meaning of an unrealistic and self-deluding fantasy.

In the 1990s-2000s, media spread numerous stories of real people that attained their "American Dream". Such are aspirational life stories of B. Obama *that achieved the American Dream by*

getting elected president (Kamp 2009), and President R.W. Reagan *whose life epitomized the American Dream. Rising from humble beginnings, he succeeded in Hollywood, broke into politics and became President* (Time Magazine 2004). American baseball coach Charlie Manuel *achieved the American Dream by leading his team to its first World Series title* (Kamp2009). From-rags-to-riches stories describe the rise of simple people to the state of social prestige and material success. Exemplary is the great success of a housewife and mother of three children, who, due to her diligence and unyieldingness, opened 54 jewellery stores throughout the country, from the sale of her self-made jewellery. She convinces people of attainability of "American Dream": *I don't ever forget what the struggle was like and that's why I'm so appreciative that the American Dream is still alive. It can happen! This is the American Dream, I can't even get my head around it* (Boudin 2017). Thus, the implementation of the dream equates with achieving the highest possible for a person social status. Not only individuals but also communities exemplify the desired prosperity: *As small towns go, Algona embodies the American Dream...it is a quietly prospering place* (Rowan 1991).

In recent years, media discourse presents the results of different official and public surveys on the meaning of the "American Dream" for Americans. The majority of them demonstrates the shifts in the meaning of the stereotype toward nonmaterial values – *the basic values of our contributing to community and society, valuing nature, and spending time with family and friends* (Fettke 2020). Now Americans associate "American Dream" with *freedom of choice in how to live, equality and safety* (New York Times 2019), protection *from the violence around them* (Tompkins 2020). *Opportunities to achieve material success and social mobility through hard work ...appear to be diminishing* (Engle 2019). Achieved economic success of the United States has shown Americans the happiness that does not lie in acquiring riches, but in public safety.

As the concept of core cultural values it has been appealed to by all American Presidents, including Ex-President D. Trump who declared *The American Dream is back* (Shiller 2017). The idiom was used to mark the American Dream Downpayment Act signed by President G. W. Bush and the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, supported by President J.R. Biden, who named the bill *a critical first step ...to building a 21st century immigration system that is grounded in dignity, safety, and fairness* (whitehouse.gov 2021). In the statement, President J.R. Biden named immigrants *dreamers*, thus associating "American Dream" with the life goal of people who enriched and strengthened the United States.

3.2. Corpus analysis of American Dream

The research conducted on the material of the influential American news magazine – Time Magazine Corpus (Time Magazine Corpus 2021) confirms a stereotypic nature of the ideal "American Dream". Ambivalence of assessment observed in the abstracts of Time Magazine Corpus proves it is a stereotype as it is acknowledged stereotypes can be "split" into two opposite, but interconnected elements: "bad", which causes negative emotions, and "good", which is perceived positively (Hall 1992, 308).

Table 1. Assessment of "American Dream"

Positive	the high altar of	a paean to	glorification of	the apotheosis of	sanctuary of
	great	legendary	venerable	right	innocent
Negative	warped	parody of	damnation of	elusiveness of	great national myth of
American Dream					

Stereotypes are established due to emotional and evaluation perception of certain properties of objects from the social world. Those, representing most fully a set of properties associated with the stereotype, are considered prototypes in view of theory of E. Rosh (1977). Prototypicality of a stereotype is "measured" by individuals who exemplify or embody the idea of "American Dream".

Table 2. Prototypicality of "American Dream"

exemplar	symbol	personification	proof of	splendid example
personify	embody	epitomize	to portray	manifest
American Dream				

Through its rather long history of existence in media discourse, the idiom *American Dream* has shown anthropomorphic characteristics. It has been described as *dead, killed* or *alive*. There have been calls for to bury "American Dream", but it survived and showed *vitality, resilience, and true power*. The reason of anthropomorphic descriptions lies in a wish to produce emotional appeal to a significant cultural ideal.

The stereotype "American Dream" shows the variability of forms. It is represented as *classic American dream of growing up to be President* or *the old American dream of overnight wealth*. It can be *new, old*, or an individual kind of *getting the diploma*. The variability of "American Dream" is conditioned by social and cultural changes, e.g. "American Dream" in the 1960s was connected with space exploration.

Table 3. Variety of "American Dream" in the Time Magazine Corpus

adjective	own	peculiar	real-life	real	passionate	expensive	secret
	odd	durable	new	old	familiar	old-fashioned	ultimate

noun-phrase	variation of American Dream	version of American Dream	American Dream of getting the diploma	American Dream of salvation by education	American Dream for outer space	different kinds of American Dream	sort of American Dream
American Dream							

The polysemy of the word dream is the ground for metaphorization to vividly express the attitude to the stereotype. Thus, *awakenings from the American Dream* conveys illusive and unreal character of the stereotype. The phrase to turn American Dream into *a nightmare* shows undesired changes, perceived as unpleasant or frightening. Comparison of the stereotypic ideal with *spiritual somnambulism* relates "American Dream" to manifestation of mental disorder, the ideas of which are trite slogans, repeated automatically. Description of *Americans as true and proud participants of American Dream* implies it is a game, in which *a stake* is stereotypic happiness.

Described metaphorically, "American Dream" represents a place, in which it is possible to be lost because of its vastness and complexity. It can be *monopolized* as a property, *restored* or *left intact*. Metaphorization shows variability of "American Dream" and possibility to transform it.

Table 4. Semantic property of quantity of *American Dream*

lost inside	remove from	exile from	destroy	monopolize	recapture	leave intact	restore
American Dream							

Associated with financial success from the 1950s, the idiom American Dream acquired the meaning of quantity that could be measured.

Table 5. Semantic property of quantity of "American Dream"

measurement of	much of	the edge of	the worldly limits of
American Dream			

Manifestation of quantity is connected with divisibility of the stereotype, the parts of which can be specified, e.g. dark side or an honored part of American Dream. The parts or the whole of it can be sold as a thing (*to price tag on American Dream*) or certified with admission (*a passport to American Dream*).

Table 6. Semantic property of divisibility of "American Dream"

ingredient of	elements of	a part of	an honored part of	piece of	share of	segments of	the very	equivalent of
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							heart of	
the vocabulary of			facet of			dark side of		
to partake				to share				
American Dream								

Negatively assessed transformation of the stereotype is described as *downsizing*. It occurs in the 1960s when the main wish of the majority was to own a house. Triviality of "American Dream" is seen as *souring*, *erosion*, *corruption* of once great idea. That is why it should be supported, ensured, promoted, and made applicable. In the 1990s and 2000s, "American Dream" is considered *reconstructed* and *revived*.

Table 7. Processes happening to "American Dream"

negative	downsizing	dismantling	fading	souring	erosion	corruption	death	ethical disintegration
positive	reshaping		restoring		preserving		rekindling	
	reconstructed		redefined			revived		
measures to take	support		ensure	make applicable		test	promote	
American Dream								

The quantity of occurrence of the idiom American Dream in the Time Magazine Corpus increases in the 60s, reaching the maximum in the 70s of the 20th century.

Table 8. Frequency of occurrence of the idiom *American Dream* in *The Time Magazine* Corpus

1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
6	15	20	53	107	86	75	39
Total 401							

As Corpus Analysis proved, in the period of study from the 1930s till the beginning of the 2000s, the stereotype "American Dream" was undergoing changes. The main constituents of its initial meaning – freedom and equality, which represent the core of cognitive structure of the stereotype in the time of its formation, has become a peripheral in the 50s. Instead, welfare as a result of success, achieved on one's own, was brought to the forefront. The beginning of the 21

century showed the core of "American Dream" started reverse transformation to the main constituent – freedom.

Figure 2. Changes the meaning of a stereotype-ideal "American Dream"



The idiom American Dream represents the interpretation pattern of happiness, which is possible to achieve in American society.

4. Conclusions

Embodying the ideal of democracy and prosperity "American Dream" represents in media discourse a stereotype of happiness. The goal of every human being is pursuit of happiness, but ways to happiness may differ greatly. The difference in understanding happiness manifests in changes of semantic meaning of the idiom American Dream. The changes marked out three periods. The first period is formation of the stereotype of liberal society that guarantees freedom and equality. The next period, which started in the 1950s, manifested changes toward obtaining happiness only in virtue of wealth. In recent years, "American Dream" is being associated more with freedom of choice than mere financial success. Though periodically "American Dream" is announced dead, the research shows it is deeply rooted in collective consciousness the stereotype-ideal of democratic society, in which it is possible to fulfil desired wishes for everyone who works hard to achieve them.

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