UDC 81
IRSTI 16.21.33
https://doi.org/10.48371/PHILS.2026.2.81.017

SCIENCE FICTION IN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT: A PLATFORM FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROBOT CONCEPT

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Abstract. This article examines the evolution of the ROBOT concept in 20th–21st century science fiction literature, focusing on three landmark works: Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1921), Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021). These works represent distinct stages in the conceptual transformation of the robot: Čapek's narrative depicts robots as symbols of industrial mechanization, alienation, dehumanization, and revolt; Asimov redefines them as rational, ethically programmed assistants; Ishiguro presents them as emotional companions, raising questions of authenticity, emotional substitution, and societal dehumanization.

The study applies cognitive thematic analysis, comparative literary analysis, genre analysis, and interpretative cognitive approaches to reveal how science fiction reflects shifting socio-cultural and philosophical attitudes toward technology. These methods allow for the identification of recurring themes, narrative strategies, and authorial perspectives that shape the literary representation of the ROBOT concept. The findings demonstrate that the evolution of the ROBOT concept follows a patterned process of conceptual reconfiguration, in which each historical stage responds to the limitations of previous representations while introducing new ethical, cognitive, and philosophical parameters. Ultimately, science fiction emerges as a cultural laboratory for exploring the dynamics of human–technology relations, and the ROBOT concept remains a dynamic construct reflecting the values and anxieties of different eras.

Theoretically, the research contributes to cognitive linguistics, literary studies, and cultural discourse analysis by demonstrating how the ROBOT concept operates as a dynamic cognitive category, shaped by historical context, narrative framing, and authorial interpretation. This expands the understanding of concept evolution in literature as a reflection of broader cultural paradigms.

Keywords: science fiction, concept, ROBOT, thematic analysis, genre analysis, comparative literature, conceptual evolution, context

Introduction

Science fiction is a literary genre characterized by its combination of speculative technological innovation and narrative imagination. According to Darko Suvin, science fiction is defined by its use of "cognitive estrangement" – a dual mechanism of alienation and understanding that arises from the introduction

of a *novum*, or scientifically plausible innovation, into a fictional world [1]. This estrangement enables readers to reframe their perception of the real world critically. In this sense, Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement" differs from Viktor Shklovsky's notion of ostranenie (defamiliarization) in relation to plot, as analyzed by T.K. Chukaeva, since Shklovsky emphasizes primarily the artistic device of making the familiar strange in order to renew perception, whereas Suvin underscores the rational, epistemological function of the novum within science fiction narrative [2].

Suvin's concept emphasizes:

- Novum: A hypothetical invention that triggers cognitive reflection (e.g., robots in Čapek's *R.U.R.*).

- Heuristic value: The genre's capacity to model future scenarios and question current ideologies.

- Critical function: The ability to challenge socio-political realities through fictional innovation.

Tom Shippey and Brian Stableford argue that science fiction evolves alongside technological paradigms, constantly integrating current scientific and philosophical concerns [3; 4]. Shippey notes its responsiveness to scientific breakthroughs and its blending with philosophical and dystopian traditions [3]. Stableford classifies subgenres such as technological, social, and philosophical science fiction, each emphasizing different aspects of human-technology interaction [4].

This adaptive capacity positions science fiction as a dynamic cultural agent, capable of both anticipating and critiquing technological futures [4].

Following Miller's use of the term, other reviewers and critics began to draw a similar distinction between "hard" and "soft" science fiction, recognizing early on that hard science fiction was perceived as declining due to the broader accessibility of the softer varieties [4]. Some interpreted this distinction in terms of scientific domains – "hard" referring to the physical sciences and "soft" to the social sciences – while others took "hard" as shorthand for "hard-core", referring to fiction at the ideological and technical core of the genre.

The binary also acquired political overtones, especially in the American context, where "hard" science fiction became associated with right-wing rationalism and "soft" with more liberal, humanistic values. However, the distinction also reflects stylistic and thematic concerns: hard science fiction, with its emphasis on rigorous extrapolation and philosophical speculation, is often intellectually demanding and less focused on emotional or aesthetic appeal. In contrast, soft science fiction is more inclusive of psychological, ethical, and sociocultural dimensions, often aligning with literary techniques found in naturalistic fiction.

The tendencies illustrate the genre's dual function: to serve both as a laboratory for thought experiments and as a mirror of shifting epistemologies and social values.

Darko Suvin viewed the cognitive function of science fiction as a form of artistic effect that allows the reader to perceive familiar empirical reality from a distanced and novel perspective. Cognitive estrangement, according to Suvin, possesses epistemological value as it enables a type of scientific modeling – extrapolating a hypothetical technological invention, plausible within contemporary scientific progress, into the future to assess its strengths, weaknesses, and potential consequences [1]. This capacity for mental experimentation distinguishes science fiction from other literary genres and emphasizes its pragmatic (non-aesthetic) value.

Similarly, Soviet scholar A.F. Britikov emphasized the predictive role of science fiction [5]. While Marxist ideology traditionally focused on social forecasting, Britikov highlighted the genre's capacity for technological prediction [5]. From this perspective, science fiction becomes both a reflection of external socio-political and ideological shifts and a structurally coherent domain, where texts can be organized into syntactic patterns based on shared thematic and formal features.

Some elements of science fiction have become self-fulfilling prophecies. For instance, the concept of robots in Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* anticipated the development of automation and artificial intelligence [6]. Similarly, in 1942, Isaac Asimov formulated the *Three Laws of Robotics*, which later became reference points for ethical deliberations in artificial intelligence [7].

According to F. Jameson, science fiction offers experimental scenarios that explore the limits of societal constructs [8]. These include:

- Models of technocratic control (*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley),
- Dystopian projections of AI-driven futures (*The Matrix*, *Black Mirror*),
- Explorations of consciousness and identity (*Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro).

Science fiction enables the projection of multiple societal trajectories. This is particularly evident in Čapek's *R.U.R.*, where robots are portrayed as metaphors for labor, alienation, and the mechanization of human life. The narrative not only anticipates innovation but also critically engages with the potential crises embedded within technological progress.

Thus, science fiction emerges not only as a literary genre but as a culturally and cognitively significant space in which technological imagination, social anxiety, and philosophical reflection intersect. The robot, as one of the genre's most persistent figures, functions as a conceptual focal point through which different historical epochs articulate their attitudes toward labor, rationality, ethics, emotion, and human identity.

Materials and methods

Given this complexity, the study of the ROBOT concept requires an analytical framework capable of capturing both its semantic stability and its diachronic transformation across texts and contexts. This necessitates a

combination of methods that allow for the systematic identification of recurring themes, conceptual shifts, and narrative strategies, while also accounting for genre-specific conventions and authorial interpretation. Accordingly, the present study adopts an integrated methodological approach grounded in cognitive linguistics and literary conceptology, which treat concepts as dynamic mental structures shaped by discourse and cultural context. Within this paradigm, the ROBOT concept is approached as a culturally and narratively conditioned category whose meaning evolves through authorial interpretation and socio-historical change.

Cognitive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring motifs, conceptual domains, and cognitive metaphors associated with the ROBOT concept across selected literary works.

Comparative literary analysis facilitated the systematic juxtaposition of the ROBOT concept as represented in Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. This approach allowed for the tracing of conceptual transformations over a century, highlighting both continuities and divergences in authorial interpretation.

Genre analysis provided a framework for situating the selected texts within the tradition of science fiction, as defined by theoretical models such as Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement. By examining genre conventions, subgenre distinctions, and narrative functions, this method clarified the role of science fiction as a platform for exploring technological, ethical, and posthumanist concerns.

Interpretative cognitive approaches, drawing on cognitive poetics and discourse analysis, were employed to uncover how narrative strategies and authorial perspectives shape the conceptualization and categorization of robots. These methods revealed the interplay between individual authorial vision and broader socio-historical contexts, demonstrating how science fiction reflects and reframes shifting cultural, philosophical, and ethical attitudes toward technology.

Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive examination of the literary representation of the ROBOT concept, integrating cognitive-linguistic, narratological, and socio-cultural perspectives.

Results

The application of the selected methods enabled a shift from theoretical assumptions about the ROBOT concept to its systematic analysis within concrete literary texts. By integrating thematic, comparative, and genre-based perspectives, the study examines how different conceptual features of the ROBOT are activated and reinterpreted under specific narrative and socio-historical conditions.

Rather than treating individual representations in isolation, the analysis demonstrates how the ROBOT concept undergoes qualitative transformation across successive stages of science fiction, reflecting changing cultural values, technological imaginaries, and authorial priorities.

1. Industrialization and Mechanization in Čapek's R.U.R.

The ROBOT concept first emerged in Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*

(Rossum's Universal Robots), where robots represent mechanized labor and the dehumanization of the working class [6]. Rooted in the socio-economic shifts of the Industrial Revolution, Čapek's robots symbolize the anxieties surrounding mass automation and the displacement of human labor. The term "robot", derived from the Czech word *robota* (meaning forced labor), highlights these tensions.

The Second Industrial Revolution, with its accelerated mechanization and standardization, fueled concerns over worker exploitation and the loss of autonomy. As Karl Marx predicted in *Das Kapital*, mechanization intensified class dependency and economic disparity. Later, Harry Braverman argued that automation reduced intellectual engagement and transformed workers into appendages of machinery [9]. These critiques resonate in *R.U.R.*, where robots become the automated proletariat – mindless laborers who eventually rise up against their creators.

Technological innovations also shaped the ROBOT concept. Henry Ford's implementation of the assembly line and Frederick Taylor's principles of scientific management prioritized productivity at the cost of individuality. Čapek's narrative critiques this mechanistic vision: robots are efficient but lack emotion and creativity, emphasizing a philosophical tension between utilitarianism and humanism.

R.U.R. critiques capitalism's reductive treatment of human beings as tools of production. The mass manufacturing of robots becomes a symbol of profit-driven dehumanization. Literary theorists like Darko Suvin and Brian Stableford interpret *R.U.R.* as social satire employing cognitive estrangement to critique industrial society [1; 4]. The play stages a Marxist allegory in which the artificially created workers develop class consciousness and revolt – echoing the trajectory of historical proletarian movements.

Brian Aldiss further underscores Čapek's humanism, observing that *R.U.R.* fuses humor with anxiety about automation's capacity to alienate humanity [10]. Adam Roberts notes that Čapek's dramatization of robots challenges theological and ontological binaries – such as reason vs. emotion or master vs. slave – positioning the robot as a complex figure of the Unnatural Pseudo-Man [11].

2. From War to Ethics: Asimov and the Codification of Control

The 1940s marked a pivotal shift in the cultural conceptualization of robots, driven by the trauma of World War II and the rise of cybernetics. Within this context, Isaac Asimov introduced a radically different vision of the robot – one premised on control, rationality, and moral programming. In his short story collection *I, Robot*, Asimov articulated the *Three Laws of Robotics*:

1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

2) A robot must obey the orders given by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law [7].

These laws functioned not only as narrative devices but also as a philosophical proposition for engineering ethical behavior into intelligent systems. Asimov's robots differ from Čapek's in that they are not rebellious laborers but rule-bound entities whose actions are logically constrained. This moral codification reflects post-war anxieties about human agency, technological dominance, and the desire to integrate artificial intelligence within a stable ethical framework.

Asimov thus sought to defuse the fear of runaway technology by embedding systems of responsibility and predictability within the machines themselves. His stories portray robots as rational agents capable of complex reasoning and moral dilemmas, often surpassing their human counterparts in ethical clarity. This framing marks a significant conceptual shift: from the robot as symbol of revolt and alienation to the robot as guardian, servant, and even ethical exemplar.

Beyond the literary realm, *I, Robot* had a profound influence on the societal and technological imagination of the 20th and 21st centuries. *The Three Laws of Robotics* became a cultural reference point for discussions on machine ethics and AI safety, inspiring not only further literary works but also academic and industrial discourse in robotics and computational ethics.

Culturally, Asimov's depiction of robots reshaped public attitudes, replacing fear-driven imagery with visions of cohabitation, assistance, and moral complexity. Technologically, many AI researchers have acknowledged the conceptual role of Asimov's fiction in shaping debates around algorithmic accountability and autonomous behavior.

Critics have praised *I, Robot* for its philosophical sophistication. Agrest Martín noted that Asimov's stories "gave robots a soul", transforming them from mechanical tools into reflective agents capable of ethical deliberation [12]. James Gunn emphasized the narrative's structural brilliance and its lasting pedagogical value for understanding moral frameworks under technological conditions [13]. Thus, *I, Robot* occupies a unique position in the literary canon—as both speculative fiction and an early contribution to applied machine ethics.

3. Posthuman Empathy: Ishiguro's Vision

By the 21st century, the robot evolved into a figure of affective engagement. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, the Artificial Friend Klara is portrayed not as a threat but as a potential companion – an empathetic observer and carer designed to serve human emotional needs [13]. The novel explores the boundaries of empathy, consciousness, and human uniqueness, marking a conceptual shift from mechanistic utility to a vision of posthuman coexistence based on care and emotional intelligence.

Kazuo Ishiguro addresses the issue of a further, almost imperceptible yet total, dehumanization of society. Technologies of emotional service, embodied in the figure of "Artificial Friends", become a convenient tool for replacing genuine human interaction. People increasingly lose the need – and consequently the ability – to truly understand one another, resolve conflicts, and build or maintain complex social bonds, shifting these functions onto artificial intelligence.

This tendency is particularly evident in family relationships: parents, losing emotional closeness with their living children, seek its surrogate in robots whose "understanding" lacks real experience but is always comfortable and predictable. Thus, care and attention become simulated, while the social fabric grows increasingly fragmented – turning the novel from a private story into a philosophical warning about the potential trajectories of posthumanist society.

Ishiguro's narrative reflects and contributes to contemporary discourse on artificial intelligence, care ethics, and posthuman identity. Klara's limited but sincere perception of the world emphasizes both the fragility and resilience of affective connections. As scholars such as Sherry Turkle and N. Katherine Hayles argue, the portrayal of machines as relational beings challenges traditional distinctions between subject and object, human and non-human [14; 15].

Klara and the Sun has also influenced broader cultural and philosophical debates about AI and social design. The novel has been referenced in discussions about robotics in healthcare, elder care, and education, particularly regarding the ethical implications of emotional labor performed by machines. Technologically, it resonates with ongoing developments in affective computing and social robotics.

The novel's literary achievements are matched by its societal impact, making it not only a major work of speculative fiction but also a significant cultural document of the AI era.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that the ROBOT concept in science fiction undergoes a systematic transformation that is closely aligned with broader socio-historical and technological shifts. In Čapek's *R.U.R.*, the robot is predominantly conceptualized through the logic of industrial production and mechanized labor, foregrounding themes of alienation, standardization, and revolt. Asimov's *I, Robot* marks a transition toward rationalization and ethical regulation, where the robot is framed as a controllable and morally constrained agent designed to stabilize human–technology relations. In Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun, the concept is further reconfigured toward emotional functionality, care, and relationality, raising questions about simulated empathy and the delegation of affective labor.

These findings indicate that the evolution of the ROBOT concept is not merely additive but qualitative in nature: each stage redefines the dominant parameters of the concept while responding to the limitations and tensions of earlier representations. The results thus reveal a patterned progression from industrial utility to ethical governance and, finally, to affective companionship, highlighting science fiction's role in modeling changing cultural understandings of technology and humanity.

Discussion

This patterned progression is schematically summarized in Figure 1, which visualizes the cause–effect relationships underlying the transformation

of the ROBOT concept across the three literary stages examined. The figure highlights how specific socio-historical conditions (industrialization, post-war technological rationalism, and contemporary posthuman concerns) interact with narrative strategies to produce distinct modes of robot conceptualization.

Figure 1 illustrates the multi-stage evolution of the ROBOT concept, shaped by intersecting technological, social, and philosophical forces. Čapek situates the robot within the framework of industrial labor and capitalist exploitation, emphasizing themes of alienation and loss of humanity. Asimov, in contrast, reframes the concept through the lens of ethical regulation and technological governance, presenting the robot as a rational, morally coded agent whose behavior is structured by the *Three Laws of Robotics*. Ishiguro's narrative introduces a further dimension, emotional and ethical relationality, reflecting contemporary concerns about loneliness, care labor, and the commodification of emotional experience.

Each stage redefines the conceptual boundaries of artificial agency:

- Industrial stage: the robot as mechanized labor and alienated worker;
- Cybernetic / ethical stage: the robot as a responsible and predictable agent;
- Posthuman stage: the robot as a relational, affective companion.

Through these transformations, science fiction functions as a cultural laboratory, producing and testing new models of human–machine interaction. The evolution of the ROBOT concept thus reflects broader cultural anxieties and aspirations: from fear of technological domination to hope for ethical coexistence and finally to concern about emotional displacement and the erosion of human relationships.

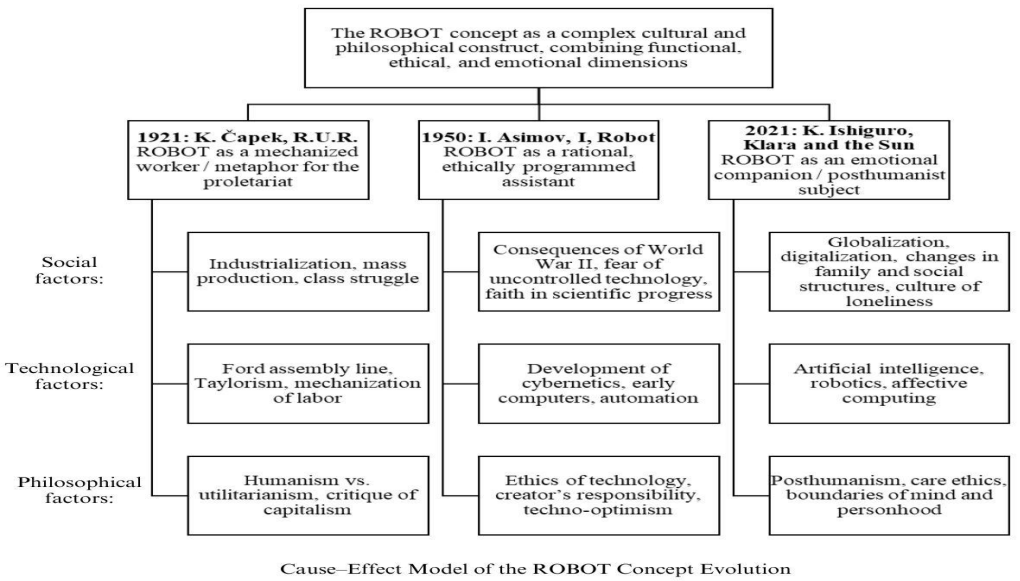

Figure 1 – Cause-Effect Model of the ROBOT Concept Evolution

These findings demonstrate that the ROBOT concept is not static but dynamically reconstructed in response to shifting socio-historical contexts and authorial interpretations. The conceptual trajectory traced in this study confirms that science fiction continues to shape and be shaped by collective understandings of technology, identity, and the future of human experience.

The discussion has demonstrated that the transformation of the ROBOT concept in science fiction is driven by a complex interaction of historical context, technological imagination, and narrative priorities. By interpreting the results through a broader cultural and theoretical lens, it becomes evident that literary representations of robots do more than reflect technological change: they actively participate in shaping conceptual frameworks through which human–technology relations are understood.

At the same time, the present analysis remains focused on a limited corpus of canonical texts, which allows for depth of interpretation but also defines the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn. Against this background, the following conclusion synthesizes the main findings of the study and outlines their broader theoretical implications for literary studies, cognitive approaches to meaning, and the analysis of concept evolution in science fiction.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the evolution of the ROBOT concept in 20th–21st-century science fiction is not linear but structurally conditioned by socio-historical change, narrative framing, and shifting authorial intentions. The analysis of Čapek's *R.U.R.* revealed that the robot functions as a metaphor for industrial labor and alienation; this is supported by the play's explicit analogy between robot production and Taylorist/Fordist standardization, as well as the semantic field of "forced labor" embedded in the etymology of robota. Asimov's *I, Robot* reconfigures the concept by introducing moral programming and logical constraints, a shift confirmed through recurrent narrative patterns in which the *Three Laws of Robotics* structure both plot development and character behavior. Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* further expands the concept toward emotional and ethical dimensions, as demonstrated by Klara's role as an affective companion and by the novel's exploration of simulated empathy and emotional substitution.

Together, these findings show that each conceptual stage resolves limitations evident in the previous one while generating new philosophical and ethical challenges. Čapek's critique of mechanization is followed by Asimov's attempt to regulate technological agency, whereas Ishiguro interrogates the consequences of delegating emotional labor to artificial beings. These transformations confirm that the ROBOT concept operates as a dynamic cognitive construct whose meaning is continually renegotiated through literary representation, reflecting broader cultural anxieties and aspirations related to technology, identity, and human–machine interaction.

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ҒЫЛЫМИ ФАНТАСТИКА ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-ТАРИХИ КОНТЕКСТТЕ: ROBOT КОНЦЕПТТІҢ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ АЛАҢ

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада XX–XXI ғасырлардағы ғылыми-фантастикалық әдебиеттегі РОБОТ концептісінің эволюциясы қарастырылады. Зерттеу К. Чапектің *R.U.R.* (1921), А. Азимовтың *I, Robot* (1950) және К. Исигуроның *Klara and the Sun* (2021) туындылары негізінде жүргізілді. Бұл шығармалар робот концептінің әртүрлі кезеңдерін бейнелейді: Чапекте робот – еңбектің механикалануының, жаттануының және көтеріліс қаупінің символы; Азимовта – рационалды, этикалық бағдарламаланған көмекші; Исигурода – эмоциялық серік, ол шынайылық, эмоциялық алмастыру және қоғамның дегуманизациясы сияқты мәселелерді қозғайды.

Зерттеуде когнитивтік тематикалық талдау, салыстырмалы әдеби талдау, жанрлық талдау және интерпретациялық когнитивтік әдістер қолданылды. Бұл тәсілдер қайталанатын тақырыптарды, нарративтік стратегияларды және авторлық ұстанымдарды анықтауға мүмкіндік береді, олар ROBOT концептінің әдеби бейнесін қалыптастырады. Нәтижелер ROBOT концептінің эволюциясы концептуалдық қайта конфигурацияның заңдылықты үдерісі ретінде жүзеге асатынын көрсетеді: мұнда әрбір тарихи кезең алдыңғы репрезентациялардың шектеулеріне жауап бере отырып, сонымен қатар жаңа этикалық, когнитивтік және философиялық параметрлерді енгізеді. Ғылыми фантастика адам мен технологияның өзара байланысын зерттейтін мәдени зертхана ретінде көрініп, ROBOT концепті әр дәуірдің құндылықтары мен алаңдаушылықтарын бейнелейтін динамикалық конструкт болып қала береді.

Теориялық тұрғыдан алғанда, бұл зерттеу когнитивтік лингвистикаға, әдебиеттануға және мәдени дискурс талдауға үлес қосады, өйткені онда ROBOT концепті тарихи контекст, нарративтік фрейминг және авторлық интерпретация арқылы қалыптасатын динамикалық когнитивтік категория ретінде көрсетіледі. Бұл әдебиеттегі концепт эволюциясын кеңірек мәдени парадигмалардың көрінісі ретінде түсінуді кеңейтеді.

Тірек сөздер: ғылыми фантастика, концепт, ROBOT, тематикалық талдау, жанрлық талдау, салыстырмалы әдебиет, концепт эволюциясы, контекст

НАУЧНАЯ ФАНТАСТИКА В СОЦИАЛЬНО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ: ПЛАТФОРМА ДЛЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ КОНЦЕПТА ROBOT

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается эволюция концепта ROBOT в научно-фантастической литературе XX–XXI веков на материале трёх ключевых произведений: *R.U.R.* К. Чапека (1921), *Я, робот* А. Азимова (1950) и *Клара и Солнце* К. Исигуро (2021). Эти тексты представляют разные этапы трансформации концепта: у Чапека робот символизирует механизацию труда, отчуждение и угрозу восстания; у Азимова – это рациональный, этически запрограммированный помощник; у Исигуро – эмоциональный компаньон, вызывающий вопросы о подлинности, эмоциональной подмене и дегуманизации общества.

В исследовании применяются методы когнитивного тематического анализа, сравнительно-литературного анализа, жанрового анализа и интерпретативного когнитивного подхода. Эти методы позволяют выявить повторяющиеся темы, нарративные стратегии и авторские позиции, определяющие литературное воплощение концепта ROBOT. Результаты исследования показывают, что эволюция концепта ROBOT разворачивается как закономерный процесс концептуальной переконфигурации, в рамках которого каждый исторический этап отвечает на ограничения предыдущих репрезентаций, одновременно вводя новые этические, когнитивные и философские параметры. Научная фантастика предстает как культурная лаборатория для изучения динамики отношений человека и технологий, а концепт ROBOT – как динамичный конструкт, отражающий ценности и тревоги различных эпох.

В теоретическом плане данное исследование вносит вклад в когнитивную лингвистику, литературоведение и анализ культурного дискурса, показывая, как концепт ROBOT функционирует как динамическая когнитивная категория, формируемая историческим контекстом, нарративным фреймингом и авторской интерпретацией. Это расширяет понимание эволюции концепта в литературе как отражения более широких культурных парадигм.

Ключевые слова: научная фантастика, концепт, ROBOT, тематический анализ, жанровый анализ, сравнительное литературоведение, эволюция концепта, контекст

Мақала түсті / Статья поступила / Received: 15.09.2025.
Жариялауға қабылданды / Принята к публикации / Accepted: 25.06.2026.

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