THE AFFECTIVE ASSOCIATIONS OF THE *SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* CONCEPT IN THE ROMANIAN CULTURAL SPACE

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Abstract Our paper presents the results of an empirical research that was conducted last year in the Romanian business environment. The analyzed corpus comprises approximately 2000 associations of the *sustainable development* concept, all provided by 627 respondents (employees in the Romanian business environment whose main interest is to use information technology properly in order to create new paradigms and values that will help contribute to a more affluent, creative and harmonious society). The main aim of this paper is to analyse how the employees from the Romanian business environment grasp the concept of *sustainable development* and relate to it, firstly, on the linguistic level and secondly, on the cultural level. The point of departure is the standpoint that the *sustainable development* concept is based upon three main pillars: environment, economy and society and it focuses on social sub-themes. Within this framework, we consider cultural diversity and intercultural understanding through language and its infinite *association* possibilities. Through language, the individual relates to certain concepts and this is done affectively. Therefore, the concept related approach is not univocal, but it involves both positive (e.g., *future, environment, education, growth, resources, recycle, responsibility, health, nature*) and negative associations (e.g., *climate change, global warming, compromise, poverty*) which are always culturally conditioned.
Keywords Sustainable development, cultural background, society, language, semantic field, environment.

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1. Introduction and Objectives

"Tell me who you associate with to tell you who you are" is a change of the Romanian proverb "tell me who you are with to tell you who you are" which reflects, in the best possible way, the topic of this empirical study, namely the analysis, from both a linguistic and cultural point of view, of the associations made by Romanian native speakers, especially those who are in an employment contract relationship.

The basis of our analysis is the *sustainable development* concept. This concept is not only a fashionable term today but also a hotly discussed topic in the business environment. Nowadays, companies invest more and more in social responsibility actions, by educating employees in the sense of knowledge and implementation of those measures that allow a sustainable economic development, without endangering future generations' prospects. The way employees perceive and relate to this concept is reflected in the words they use and associate with *sustainable development*, the associations being primarily affective. These associations are the result of the employees' knowledge level regarding the concept and their experience on how they *lived* sustainable development. Nevertheless, we shouldn't forget the fact that any experience is viewed and filtered through the *cultural lenses* (through the cultural environment in which they were born and live).

By combining these two concept analysis approaches, this paper aims to present an original empirical analysis, providing an overview of how the analysed concept is reflected in language based on a double levelled research which emphasizes, on one side, the ways in which people make associations regarding *sustainable development* and, on the other hand, the way in which they experience *sustainable development*. The results of this analysis can be used both in companies to develop sustainable development educational programs and as a starting point for similar empirical studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Associations and Semantic Fields

From a linguistic point of view, when we say *association* we immediately think of *a semantic field*, for this reason it is necessary to clarify the meaning of these two concepts. The *lexical field* definition is based on the way of understanding the lexical meaning of words, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. Lutzeier highlights the idea that the semantic field concept plays an important role in understanding and recording the words' lexical meaning.[1] Trier[2] places[3] the semantic field between the

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[1] Rolf Peter Lutzeier, "Lexikalische Felder - was sie waren, was sie sind und was sie sein könnten." in *Die Ordnung Der Wörter*, ed. Gisela Harras (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 1995), 4.

word and the vocabulary as a whole, thus reaching a well-structured lexical meaning. Oparina[4] considers that the semantic field comprises all content elements that cover a specific field of human activity. The associations that individuals make with different concepts are closely related to their subjective experiences in the environment in which they operate. From this point of view, the associations give a certain elasticity to the semantic field; the semantic fields of the same concept being able to present differences depending on the group of people who offered the associations. Thus, semantic fields can be understood and analysed both within a language and contrastively, in terms of how to achieve semantic fields for the same concept in different languages. Ščur[5] distinguishes between ontological associations (*ontologische Assoziationen*), conditioned by people's social experiences, and empirical associations (*empirische Assoziationen*), which are based on people's subjective experiences, the latter reflecting a certain totality of linguistic means and phenomena that the person knows. Viewed from this perspective, the associations, indicated by the sustainable development research participants, provide an overview of how they *lived* and, therefore, *grasp* and *perceive* sustainable development.

2.2 Language, Culture, Society, Sustainable Development

The society we are living in is the society of an instant click that opens the world, breaks the barriers and gives access to any type of information no matter time or space. Nowadays we are living in a society that is highly shaped by the digital

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"Wortfelder, lexikalische Felder, darin sind wir uns wohl alle einig, sollen einen Beitrag zur Erfassung der lexikalischen Bedeutung leisten."

[2] Jost Trier, "Das sprachliche Feld" in *Neue Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung* 10, 1934, 430. "Felder sind die zwischen den Einzelworten und dem Wortschatzganzen lebendigen sprachlichen Wirklichkeiten, die als Teilganze mit dem Wort das Merkmal gemeinsam haben, daß sie sich ergliedern, mit dem Wortschatz hingegen, daß sie sich ausgliedern."

[3] For more details regarding Trier's semantic field theory, see Jost Trier, *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes: Die Geschichte eines sprachlichen Feldes* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1931) and Jost Trier, "Sprachliche Felder" in *Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung* 8 (1932), 417-427.

[4] K. Oparina, "The lexical-semantic field as a verbalization mean of the auctorial worldvew in text" in *The scientific heritage* 46 (Vol. 5, 2020), 28–30. https://www.tsh-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/VOL-5-No-46-46-2020.pdf. (Accessed in October 2020). "Der Terminus «das Feld» bedeutet in der Linguistik die Gemeinsamkeit der inhaltlichen, die einen bestimmten Bereich der menschlichen Erfahrung decken."

[5] Georgij Semenovič Ščur, *Feldtheorien in der Linguistik.* Sprache der Gegenwart 42. (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1977), 69.

technologies. Today's borders are ideal because they open the door to an unlimited number of cultural horizons and one's experience in a language turns into a lifelong intercultural adventure that starts from the moment we meet the other culture for the first time. Any language is a continuously changing and lifelong battlefield.

The major changes in the Romanian society, the widening of the economic – financial relations between Romania and the other countries determined an opening of the Romanian language towards the influence of the English language. The influence of English on the Romanian language is achieved both by the massive takeover of lexical elements from English and by the assignation of some English meanings to a linguistic reality already existing in the Romanian language. In 1927, Werner Heisenberg, developed, in quantum mechanics, *the uncertainty principle*. According to this principle, no matter how much we refine measurement, the level of uncertainty can never be totally reduced. By extrapolation, through the act of direct observation, the subject modifies the researched object. From this point of view, the respondents' experiences regarding the *sustainable development* concept intertwine, generating different linguistic and cultural attitudes. This is an outspoken aspect that was identified as a result of our research. There were respondents who felt more comfortable to provide answers in English even though Romanian was their mother tongue due to the fact that in the business environment English is the language of international communication. Moreover, the respondents, being involved in building up long term relationships with clients all over the world, felt at ease to use in their answers both Romanian and English depending on the frequency they use sustainable development associations in their daily work. It is said that "Romanians are oratorical by nature – neighbours say long-winded – and are proud of their sophistication in discourse,[6]" which is a thing that we noticed based on the respondents' answers (a variety of morphological categories regarding the *sustainable development* concept: nouns, adjectives and verbs, both when providing answers in English and Romanian).

3. Research Method

The research method is based on an onomasiological approach, as we start from the *sustainable development* concept and analyse its ways of expression, starting with the following question: What words and expressions are associated with the *sustainable development* concept in the Romanian linguistic and cultural space?

Within the context of *sustainable development* concept analysis and the way in which this concept already exists in the respondents' *consciousness*

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[6] Richard Lewis, *When Cultures Collide (3rd ed.)* (Boston. London: Nicholas Brealey International, 2006), 326.

(consciousness understood in the sense that if one is conscious of something, one also has knowledge of it), the following question was addressed too - What does *sustainable development* mean in the Romanian cultural space? - as a starting point for a linguistic in-depth analysis too, because through language we express not only the concepts by themselves but also the way we relate to them.

Sustainable development (SD), as a concept, was propagated internationally by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. The WCED's Brundtland report defines SD as "a development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.[7]" Since then the concept has been constantly debated and, in 1992, the United Nations summit in Rio established the action plan for SD, highlighting the fact that social and economic dimensions are as important as environmental perspectives. From that moment, "the tradition of structuring SD around three dimensions, namely *environment, economy* and *society*, was established and widely accepted.[8]" The UNESCO framework for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development proposes a specific number of sub-themes to the three SD dimensions. The social sub-themes are: human rights, peace and human security, gender equality, cultural diversity and intercultural understanding, health, HIV/AIDS and governance. The environmental sub-themes are: natural resources, climate change, rural development, sustainable urbanization and disaster prevention and mitigation. The economic sub-themes are: poverty, reduction, corporate responsibility and accountability and market economy.[9] According to UNESCO, all these dimensions should always be expressed in terms of people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

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[7] WCED, *Our Common Future*. The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41.

[8] Niklas Gericke, Jelle Boeve-de Pauw, Teresa Berglund, Daniel Olsson, "The Sustainability Consciousness Questionnaire: The theoretical development and empirical validation of an evaluation instrument for stakeholders working with sustainable development." in *Sustainable Development 2019; 27* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment 2018), 36. For more details on sustainable development see Bob Giddings, Bill Hopwood, Geoff O'Brien, "Environment, economy and society: Fitting them together into sustainable development" in *Sustainable Development 2002; 10*, 187-196.

[9] UNESCO. United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014, UNESCO. *International implementation scheme* (Paris, France, UNESCO, 2006), 18-21.

3.1 Corpus

Each of the 627 study participants indicated three words which they associate the *sustainable development* concept with, thus constituting a corpus that includes 1485 words and expressions that reflect how they relate to the analysed concept.

In the preliminary stage of the corpus analysis, the criteria for categorizing the collected data were established. From a morphological point of view, we decided to analyse three morphological categories: nouns, verbs and adjectives as they represent independent words classes, nouns being used for expressing ideas and concepts, adjectives being used for describing ideas and concepts' characteristics and features and verbs being used for indicating our own actions through which we put into practice the analysed concept.

From a semantic perspective, it is very interesting to analyse not only the lexical meaning of individual words, but also the new meanings resulting from word combinations, meanings that do not correspond or are not equal to the sum of the component words' meanings. Therefore, we divided corpus data into two main categories: words that stand-alone and expressions (within the expressions, the words lost their proper meaning and received a totally new meaning, specific to the expression they are part of).

3.2 Corpus analysis

The corpus analysis includes:
• A morphological analysis
• A semantic analysis

The morphological analysis includes a quantitative analysis of how corpus data are distributed in the three analysed words classes: nouns, verbs and adjectives. Following a preliminary semantic categorization (words and expressions), the second part of our semantic analysis focuses on sorting out all words and expressions into four main semantic categories, based on the meaning that they have.

These four main semantic categories are:
1. *Durability* (duration / possibility of existence / permanence / in the long run / years of life / hours of use)
2. *Feasibility* (something being easily or conveniently done / something that is achievable, possible – indefinite in time)
3. *Consciousness* (understanding of the surrounding reality)
4. *Prediction* (skill or possibility to predict the occurrence or evolution of future events or based on the analysis of certain currently known data)
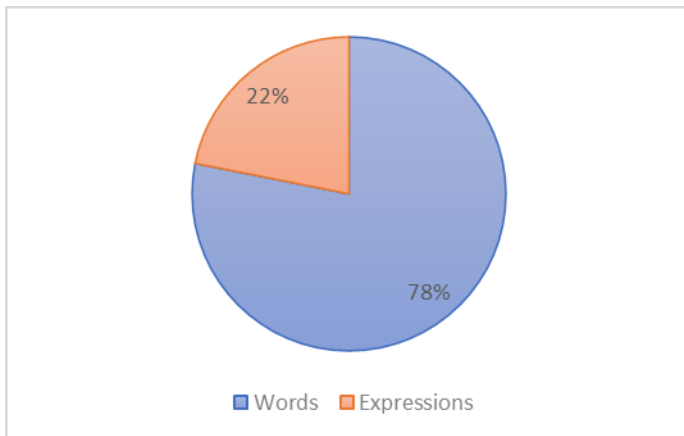
These four semantic categories resulted from the way in which the *sustainable development* concept is understood in the business environment. From an economic point of view, *sustainable development* always involves three pillars: social, environmental and economic.

3.3 Quantitative Analysis – Results and Interpretation

The elements' distribution in the two semantic categories (words and expressions) is represented in **Table 1** and **Diagram 1**.

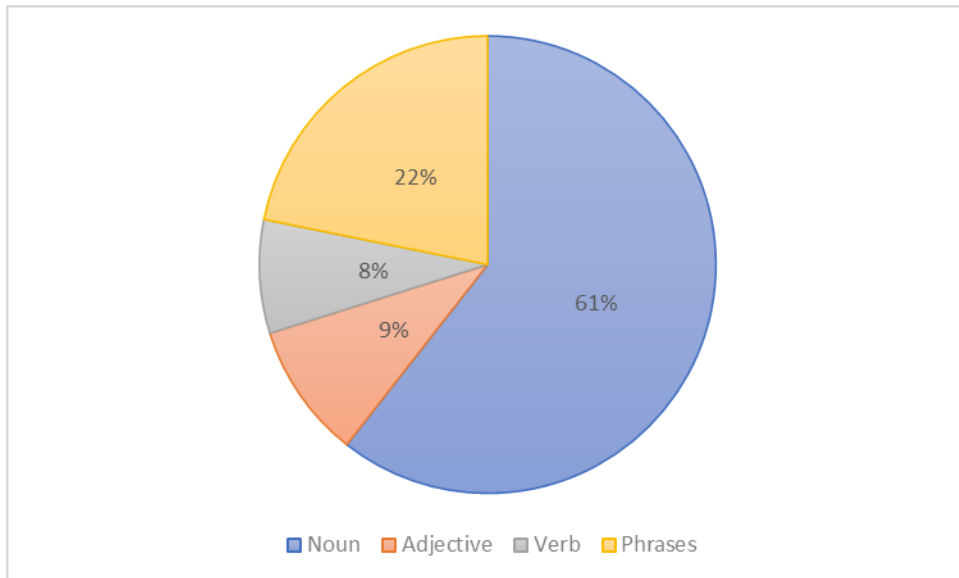| Semantic	Number (N=1485)
Words	1160
Expressions	325

Table 1: *Words and expressions*

Diagram 1: *Words and expressions*

As shown in the table and diagram below, almost 80% of the corpus elements included in the *word category* are nouns. Verbs and adjectives represent about 10% of the analysed elements. This unequal distribution is surprising due to the fact that there is a smaller number of verbs compared to the other words classes. This indicates the fact that the respondents relate, to a small extent, sustainable development with concrete activities, but rather with ways of designating it.

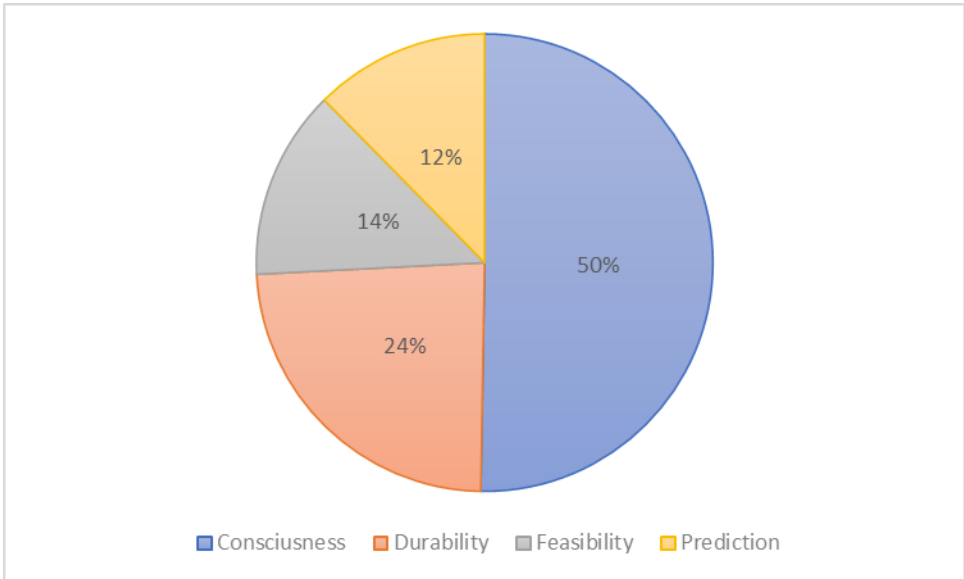| Words Class	Number (N=1160)
Noun	899
Adjective	142
Verb	119

Table 2: *Words Classes*

Diagram 2: *Words Classes*

Regarding the way in which corpus elements belong to the four defined semantic categories: *awareness*, *sustainability*, *feasibility* and *prediction*, it stands out that 50% of them are semantically related to consciousness, and almost 25% of them are related to durability. The remaining 25% is distributed almost equally between the last two categories: *feasibility* and *prediction*. These data are presented in **Table 3** and **Diagram 3**.

	Consciousness	Durability	Feasibility	Prediction
Adjective	73	33	31	5
Phrases	158	63	50	52
Noun	448	251	81	119
Verb	67	8	36	8

Table 3: *Semantic Categories*

Diagram 3: *Semantic Categories*

These results indicate, to a large extent, an association of *sustainable development* concept with the consciousness process and what this process means. The concept of consciousness has many different meanings, mostly in psychology. According to theoretical studies in the field, consciousness is often used synonymously with self-consciousness, as one differentiates oneself from the surrounding world. Second, consciousness is used to refer to a state of wakefulness. Third, consciousness is sometimes used to mean knowledge, in the sense that if one is conscious of something, one also has knowledge of it. However, knowledge can be non-conscious and consciousness does not necessarily involve knowledge. Therefore, the definition of consciousness can be referred to as experience itself, and consciousness can be exemplified by all the things we can observe or experience.[10]

Table 4 presents the most common 15 elements in each category, all being ordered based on their frequency within the corpus.

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[10] Niklas Gericke, Ibid., 37 and Max Velmans, "How to define consciousness – and how not to define consciousness" in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16(5), (2009), 139-156.

	Word	Morphological Class	Semantic Category	Frequency
1	future	N	C	61
2	environment	N	C	54
3	education	N	C	48
4	growth	N	C	30
5	resources	N	D	29
6	recycle	V	F	29
7	responsibility	N	C	26
8	health	N	C	20
9	nature	N	C	20
10	economy	N	D	18
11	ecology	N	D	15
12	recycling	N	C	14
13	social	A	C	13
14	development	N	C	13
15	efficiency	N	C	13
16	peace	N	C	13
17	ecosystem	N	C	12
18	reuse	V	C	11
19	economic	A	C	8
20	efficient	A	D	8
21	long term	A	D	8
22	climate change	E	C	8
23	long term	E	D	7
24	quality education	E	C	6
25	grow	V	C	6
26	eco-friendly	A	C	5
27	human	A	C	5
28	renewable	A	C	5
29	natural resources	E	C	5

30	no poverty	E	C	5
31	future generations	E	P	5
32	care	V	C	5
33	environmental	A	C	4
34	green	A	C	4
35	secure	A	C	4
36	continuous	A	D	4
37	climate action	E	C	4
38	eco-friendly	E	C	4
39	green energy	E	C	4
40	learn	V	C	4
41	renew	V	C	4
42	support	V	C	4
43	improve	V	F	4
44	smart	A	C	3
45	durable	A	D	3
46	reliable	A	D	3
47	viable	A	F	3
48	clean energy	E	C	3
49	economic growth	E	C	3
50	global warming	E	C	3
51	good health and well being	E	D	3
52	human development	E	D	3
53	better future	E	P	3
54	chance	V	C	3
55	compromise	V	C	2
56	development	V	C	2
57	reduce	V	F	2
58	create	V	P	2
59	plan	V	P	2
60	acknowledge	V	C	1

Table 4: *Frequency*

3.4 Data Qualitative Analysis

From the answers' analysis, we noticed that the respondents have a preference for positive associations of the *sustainable development* concept, this being associated with *future*, *environment* and *education*. The noun *future* has the highest occurrence. Moreover, from a cultural point of view, *future* is in a strong connection with the time reference (the respondents consider that future might mean sustainable development in the long run). Increased attention must be paid to the adjectives that some respondents have associated with the concept of *sustainable development*: durable, reliable, viable.

According to Chambers Compact Thesaurus[11], *durable* means lasting, enduring, long-lasting, abiding, strong, solid and even reliable; *viable* means practicable, possible, workable, usable, operable, achievable and *reliable* means certain, sure, dependable. As we have already mentioned in the first part of this paper both positive (*future, environment, education, growth, resources, recycle, responsibility, health, nature, economy, ecology, recycling, social, development, efficiency, peace, eco-system, reuse*) and negative associations (*climate change, long term, poverty, chance, global warming, compromise*) are always culturally (the Romanian point culture) and linguistically (the native language) conditioned. From this of view, the Romanian linguistic reality is more welcoming than the English linguistic reality which, in some circumstances, is more restrictive. Thus, translation downsides are absolutely inherent; some borrowed English concepts might not have an identical Romanian counterpart or vice versa.
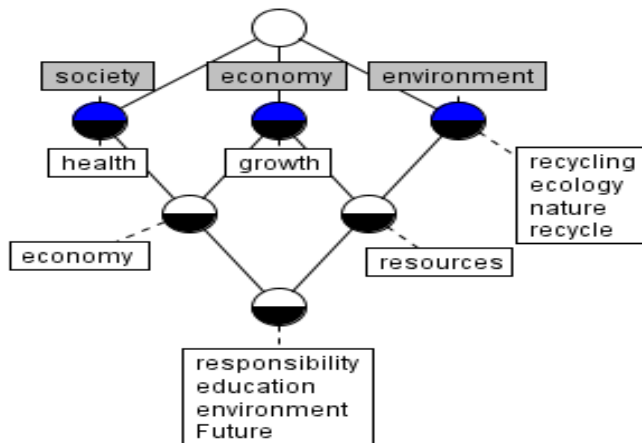
Starting from the three pillars used in defining the *sustainable development* concept, in the second part of the qualitative analysis, we focused on the way in which the corpus terms integrate themselves, from a semantic point of view, in the meanings network of the analysed semantic field. For this part of the analysis, we opted for the use of those elements with a frequency higher than 10. Some of the terms that have frequencies lower than 10 represent, from a morphological point of view, derivatives of some of the 15 chosen terms.

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[11] *Chambers Compact Thesaurus* (Edinburgh, Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, 2001)

	Environment	Economy	Society
future	x	x	x
environment	x	x	x
education	x	x	x
growth		x	
resources	x	x	
recycle	x		
responsibility	x	x	x
health			x
nature	x		
economy		x	x
ecology	x		
recycling	x		
social	x	x	x
development		x	x
efficiency		x	
peace			x
ecosystem	x		
reuse	x		

Table 5: *Frequency higher than 10*

Diagram 4: *Sustainable Development Pillars*

This lattice shows the way in which the most common identified terms reflect the three sustainable development pillars. The first aspect that we notice is the fact that the noun *future* encompasses the three pillars of sustainable development, namely: *environment*, *economy* and *society*. The second noticeable aspect is the fact that *environment, education* and *responsibility* are the other three terms that also reflect the sustainable development pillars. Another aspect that stands out is the term *health* used in association with *society*. Among all the society related issues the one that respondents bear in mind is *health*. From our point of view, it is very interesting to see how respondents connect *society* with *health*, the latter being one of the major challenges of the Romanian contemporary society. As far as we are concerned, the term *growth* symbolizes a specific accuracy of the way in which *sustainable development* concept is perceived by the respondents. Any kind of *growth* is directly influenced by *responsibility* and *education* and how we personally approach the e*nvironment*. Recycling, environment and nature represent behaviours that reflect the way in which both education and responsibility towards the environment are perceived and self-thought by the respondents.

As we have already mentioned, the respondents are culturally and linguistically rooted. In his research on cultural standards, Thomas[12] states the idea that cultural standards can be understood as an *orientation system* that is typical for a nation, an organization or a group. These cultural standards allow people to cope with life challenges and environment by defining certain norms, rules and values. Cultural standards[13] create kind of a *common framework*, assuring individuals that their mindsets are shared and understood by their fellow human beings. For the Romanian culture it is known the fact that it is a polychronic one; a polychronic culture, according to Hofstede, is a culture where people see their lives in a non-linear fashion, with a multi-active time framework (not surprisingly, future has the highest occurrence in our respondents' answers), meaning that time is personality or event related, a subjective commodity which can be manipulated. He refers to culture as "the software of the mind[14]" and states that every person carries within him or herself a pattern of thinking, feeling and potentially acting which were learnt throughout their lifetime. Furthermore, culture is not inherited but learnt as it derives from the social environment and should be distinguished from the personality (if partly inherited and party learned and unique) on the one hand and from the human nature (if inherited and universal) on the other.[15] Triandis considers

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[12] Alexander Thomas, *Grundlagen der interkulturellen Psychologie* (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2005), 22.

[13] Alexander Thomas, *Kulturvergleichende Psychologie. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen, Verlag für Psychologie by Hogrefe, 1993).

[14] Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, (Maastricht, McGraw-Hill, 1997), 4.

[15] Ibid., 4-7.

that culture is the „human made part of the nature,[16]" and the affective associations we make regarding some specific concepts are the result of "the subjective culture,[17]" being strongly connected to the cultural specificity of each nation. Maletzke considers that culture is the way in which people live, develop and approach the environment.[18] Hall refers to culture as the "man's medium" and according to his idea there is not one single aspect of the human life that is not altered or at least touched by culture. Consequently, "this means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved [...]. It is the least studied aspect of culture that influences behaviour in the deepest and most subtle ways.[19]"

Romanians are both person-oriented (they put a focus on social relationships) and status-oriented (in society, education and economy). According to Hall's theory, cultures are higher in context and lower in context. Higher context cultures are collectivistic (groups of people who will care more about what we have in common than how we differ) and lower context cultures that are individualistic (because people value their uniqueness more than their similarities). From this point of view, the Romanian culture is a collectivistic culture, putting an emphasis on what we have in common rather than what makes us different.

4. Final Considerations

As we have already pointed out in the introductory part of this paper, our main aim was to identify the affective associations of the *sustainable development* concept in the Romanian cultural space.

Our empirical analysis was based on the answers provided by 627 respondents from the business environment. Based on the respondent's answers, we developed a corpus which was analysed both from a morphological and semantic point of view. Surprisingly, the most widely used term in association with the *sustainable development* concept is the word *future*, which, nevertheless, involves the Romanians' time approach from a cultural perspective.

In the light of the previous findings that we have already referred to, we should conclude that through language, the individual relates to certain concepts and this is done affectively. Therefore, the concept related approach is not univocal,

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[16] Harry Charlambos Triandis, "The self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts" in *Psychological Review*, 96, 506.

[17] Harry Charlambos Triandis, *The Analysis of Subjective Culture* (New York, Willey, 1972), 4.

[18] Gerhard Maletzke, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation. Zur Interaktion zwischen Menschen verschiedener Kulturen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), 16. „Kultur ist die Art und Weise, wie die Menschen leben und was sie aus sich selbst und ihrer Welt machen".

[19] Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*, (Garden City: Ancho Press/Doubleday, New York, 1977), 14.

but it involves both positive and negative associations which are always culturally conditioned. The way in which we perceive things, relate to them, express and share them is always within a linguistic framework and a cultural one. To affectively know, to be affectively conscious and to affectively experience (to live) things are the three conceptualizations of sustainable development phenomena that we have identified as a result of our research. The process of living in a language is deeply rooted in the culture we belong to. Our internalized language (our thoughts), as soon as it is verbalized, reflects a certain behaviour which manifests within a culturally and affectively rooted framework.