



THE XXVI ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, 27–30 October 2015

## In Search of National Character

Svetlana G. Ter-Minasova<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Lomonosov Moscow State University, 31/1, Lomonosovsky boulevard, Moscow, 119192, Russia*

### Abstract

The paper deals with the concept of national character which has become especially popular nowadays, at the time of globalization, because of a prospect (or threat) felt by all nations of the possible coming loss of national identities under the pressure of global processes. The author examines various probable sources of information on the concept of national character marking their positive and negative features. The sources under investigation are: international jokes, classical literature, folklore and – surprise, surprise! – national language and culture.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of National Research Tomsk State University.

*Keywords:* national character; stereotypes; jokes; literature; folklore; language; culture

### 1. Introduction

Language and man are inseparable. Language does not exist outside man and man as *Homo sapiens* does not exist outside language. So, man cannot be studied outside language and vice versa. Language reflects the world around us - through man and for man, language likewise reflects the culture created by man, preserves it for posterity and hands it down from generation to generation. Language is a cognitive tool through which man perceives the universe and culture. And, finally, language is a cultural tool: it moulds people, determines their behaviour, way of life, outlook, mentality, ideology and national character. The term and concept of national character are to be discussed in greater detail because the paper is focused on them.

**Language reflects the world and culture and moulds the native speakers of this language** as well as their national character. All these well-known truths look obvious. However, the mission of scholars is to doubt the

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-495-734-0344.

*E-mail address:* [president@ffl.msu.ru](mailto:president@ffl.msu.ru)

obvious, investigate and analyze it. In humanities it is even more so than in sciences for obvious reasons: the subject of scientists' investigation is the world outside man, it is more definite and more "objective" in the sense that it exists irrespective of humans.

The national character is not an object of the outside world, it exists only in the human mind. No wonder that this concept arouses some doubts and arguments about its existence.

Indeed, what is meant by national character? Is there such a thing? How correct is it to generalise and extrapolate typical features onto a whole nation when it is a known fact that all people are different? There is an English saying that goes: "It takes all sorts to make a world". Can one then say: "It takes one sort to make a nation?" Or does national character imply a set of stereotyped qualities attributed to one nation by another – often not entirely friendly - nation? Where should one look for the concept of national character? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions.

## 2. Methodology

The questions concerning the term and the concept of national character have been in the focus of scholarly attention beginning from the second half of the 20th century. Most of the researchers of the concept agree that, as has been mentioned above, the personality of a native speaker is moulded by his mother tongue. Accordingly, a national language both reflects and shapes national character. In other words, if language shapes the personality of the individual native speaker, then it follows that it must play an equally constructive role in the formation of national character. At the same time it is clear that it is impossible to separate the passive, "reflective" and active, formative functions of the language, that this is no more than a heuristic technique, a convention used in research. Fully aware of its conventional nature, we will continue to make use of this technique, however, to show, with examples taken from the English and Russian, how language moulds the personality through a great variety of means at its disposal of which national culture is, undoubtedly, the main one. As a rule, people are unaware of the active role language plays in moulding their character, determining their behaviour, attitude to life, people, etc.

A lot has been written by psychologists, culturologists, sociologists and philologists on the correlation between national culture and personality. In their book, "Language and Culture", E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov, comment as follows in this connection: "A man is not born a Russian, German or Japanese etc., but becomes one as a result of living in the relevant national community of people. In its upbringing, a child is exposed to the impact of the national culture to which, the people surrounding it, belong" (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov, 1990, p. 25).

The controversial and complex nature of the concept of national character indicates a certain terminological confusion – a problem common to all humanities. Instead of **national character**, Nikolai Erofeev uses the term **ethnic idea** which he defines as "a verbal portrait or image of a different nation" (Erofeev, 1982, p.7) and S. Arutyunyan – the term **psychological make-up of a nation** which he defines as "a unique sum total of different manifestations of a people's spiritual life" (Arutyunyan, 1966, p. 23). However, **national character** remains the most common term.

Many believe that national character is not a combination of specific traits characteristic of a given nation, but rather a unique set of universal human traits.

At the plenary session at the opening of "The Week of the Russian Language in France", in March 1998, V. Kostomarov spoke to that effect: "National culture is not a combination of unique features, characteristic of a particular people, it is a distinct set of universal features and ideas". And Yu. Bromley likewise notes that one can talk "only of the relative nature of national character traits, of nuances in their manifestation." (Bromley, 1975, p. 94)

Thus, we get an extremely contradictory picture. Is there such a thing, then, as national character? If there is, what evidence of its existence can be considered objective and scientific?

Where should we search for it?

What can be regarded as a source of objective information on national character?

Let us try and identify these sources.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1110524>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1110524>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)