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Poems in lockdown: Cultural aspects of English and Russian “coroneologisms”

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Abstract

Thanks largely to the affordances of social media, the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked a glut of neologisms, loan-words, abbreviations, calques and other linguistic variants. The crisis was accompanied in most nations by social measures curtailing what have long been seen as fundamental liberties; hence, it has foregrounded the re-emergence of old controversies about individualism vs collectivism, the nature of personal freedom, the role of the state, the right to healthcare, the distribution of wealth, and so on. On the UK side, our study explores some emergent neologisms in English and Russian, especially implicit meaning in terms like “social distancing” and “lockdown”. We consider cross-cultural implications that relate to the way each national group conceptualized, and lived through, the experiences of lockdown. Linguistic practices may reflect deep-seated habits of being that characterize different countries, and thus our research may shed light on long-standing questions of national stereotypes. We look at some of the Covid-19 neologisms produced and/or used in British and Russian contexts, on the assumption that, by comparing these micro-linguistic practices, it is possible to learn something concerning the cultural realities of the countries in question, along the lines proposed in the works of Hofstede (2001) and Wierzbicka (2003).

Key words

Covid 19, cross-cultural, social actors, neologisms, poetry, English and Russian

1.1 Introduction

Thanks largely to the affordances of social media, the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked a glut of neologisms, loan-words, abbreviations, calques and other linguistic variants. Some of these may have official origins (*lockdown*, *social distancing*, *pandemic*, *R-number*, *herd immunity*, *patient zero*), but the great majority are coined by the invisible masses of web users around the world. As such, they represent attempts by internet users to relate to their experiences, to reach out to others, to share or appeal for help, to accuse, to rebel. As Goddard and Wierzbicka (2021) note, health messages intended for “ordinary people” need to be understandable to these “ordinary people”; and a globalized world needs global messages which are clear and cross-translatable. In this context, the English language tends to dominate, but as our study shows, linguistic creativity is also displayed by Russian users.

We consider cross-cultural implications connected to the way each national group conceptualized, and lived through, the experiences of lockdown. Linguistic practices, in fact, may reflect deep-seated habits of being that characterize different countries, and thus our research may shed light on long-standing questions of national stereotypes. The crisis was accompanied in most nations worldwide by

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social measures curtailing what have long been seen as fundamental liberties; hence, it has foregrounded the re-emergence of old controversies about individualism vs collectivism, the nature of personal freedom, the role of the state, the right to healthcare, the distribution of wealth, and so on. We look at some of the Covid-19 neologisms produced and/or used in British and Russian contexts, on the assumption that, by comparing these micro-linguistic practices, it is possible to learn something concerning the cultural realities of the countries in question, along the general lines proposed in the comparative cultural works of Hofstede (2001) and Wierzbicka (1991, 2002).

1.2 Covid and neologisms

The Covid-19 pandemic has had profound effects on global social structures, behaviour patterns and economic profiles that are without parallel in the experience of those born after 1945. Only the devastation of the World Wars, in fact, provides an appropriate comparison for this extraordinary event, whose effects have arguably been even more catastrophic because they have caused most damage in some of the poorest, and most populous, countries of the world (Lone and Ahmad, 2020).

Our paper highlights the shifts of behaviour required from populations globally as their governments attempted to repel the deadly virus. So radical have these been that what used to be “normal” social activity has become a distant memory for most people. Humans everywhere have adapted to concepts like “lockdown”, which normalized a state of house arrest for the great majority of a population; or “social distancing”, which required them, on pain of possible judicial sanctions, to communicate with friends and family at a certain distance. So great an upheaval – which, at a stroke, abolished most of the social routines that most people consider synonymous with life itself – could hardly fail to leave traces in language, as people strove to come to terms with it. The internet is key in accounting for the unprecedented spawning of neologisms that has occurred with Covid, compared with other crises, as people increasingly relied on social media to fill the gaping holes in their social diaries, in their affective patterns, holes left by enforced withdrawal from actual human contact. To give one example, the word “Blursday” was coined, evoking the common sensation in lockdown of days that run into one another, the loss of normal weekday rhythms.¹ The word encapsulated a common experience, and provoked self-deprecatory laughter at our own vulnerability. As Carter (1999) highlights, there is a social dimension to such humour, which construes solidarity by making us laugh at ourselves.

In this study, we consider national stereotypes and their bearing on behaviour during the pandemic. How, for example, does the average Briton’s supposed stand-offishness, the tendency to consider one’s home as a castle, play into the discourse of maintaining “social distance”? How do they react when, as a member of a supposedly “individualistic” social group, they are required to prioritize the needs of the community above their own? On the Russian side, the question is rather how far the “collective” ethos that characterized the communist period, and which is now pressurised by enforced adaptation to the requirements of a market economy, has enabled the nation as a group to face down the crisis. In both cases we highlight the role of socially oriented ideologies (in the sense delineated by Fairclough 2003), that are encapsulated in the neologisms produced during the period of lockdown. That is to say, we are not concerned with tracing specifically political ideologies, as the British/Russian perspective might suggest, but with identifying the “positions, attitudes, beliefs, perspectives, etc. of social groups” (Fairclough 2003: 9), and the pragmatic effects that accompany the linguistic practice in question, i.e. the creation of neologisms.

1.3 Neologisms

A neologism is defined as “an item newly introduced into the lexicon of a language” (Malmkjær and Anderson, 1995), a broad definition which, however, already problematizes many of the terms it would be possible to study under this heading. Implicit in the notion of neologism is a sense that the word has become, or is about to become, part of the lexis of the particular language, a resource for everyday language users to express their meanings. This is the case for the recent journalistic coinage “Brexit” (Fontaine, 2017), for example, which still enjoys wide circulation. However, as Roig-Marín (2021) notes, the circulation of “coroneologisms” may be very limited; it seems unlikely that “covidiot”, “smizing” (smiling with the eyes only, above one’s facemask), “zoombombing” (to gate-crash a zoom

¹ See, e.g. ‘Coping with Blursday’, <https://www.kellybarron.com/coping-with-blursday/>, last visit 10/05/2022.

call), “locktail” (a cocktail in lockdown) along with thousands of similar examples, will survive the pandemic, or even see the end of it. In this study we are not concerned with these ephemeral coinages, but rather with what we consider to be more lasting neologisms.

It is worth briefly considering the phenomenon of neologism in general terms. Many, perhaps most, are coined by journalists acting as professional wordsmiths (Ayto, 2003; Kerremans, 2015, pp. 158-9). It is noticeable that, compared to past episodes of global trauma, the current pandemic has apparently stimulated unprecedented bursts of linguistic inventiveness. Aitchison (2003), for example, finds only one word, “deathscape”, coined by reporters following the Twin Towers attacks in 2001, though other neologisms, like *islamophobia*, *Salafism*, *blowback*, etc, were to follow.

The pandemic has resulted in similar linguistic developments in Russia, some apparent borrowings direct from English, others strictly Russian coinages. The term “aftershock” (афтершок), for example, is now applied to the shocking consequences of any calamity, not necessarily an earthquake. Others are “new normal” (новая нормальность), the state of the world after the outbreak of Covid-19, international protologisms such as “infodemic” (инфодемия), a term for the proliferation of often false Covid-related stories, as well as “lockdown” (локдаун), and “covidiot” (ковидиот). Other neologisms from spoken Russian referring to social practices normalized due to Covid restrictions include “remote work” (удаленная работа) and “self-isolation” (самоизоляция). A borrowed word combination, “social distance” (социальная дистанция) is not completely new in Russian media discourse, and its semantics encompass the “apartness/stand-offishness of an individual from a different culture/nation”, “a gap between the well-off and the poor”, as well as “a distance between people during a formal communication”, which may refer to both literal and figurative distance.² Interestingly, this metaphorical term, which was formerly used to describe tendencies towards destabilization brought about by divisions in Soviet-Russian society, has narrowed its scope to denote “physical distance” alone (Belyaeva, 2018). The 2020 Covid pandemic brought a precise new meaning in this sense, the physical distance of 1.5–2 metres considered necessary to avoid spread of the disease.

Groups of people have been variously described: “coronasceptics” (коронаскептики) and “coronadissidents” (коронадиссиденты); “anti-maskers” (антимасочники), “go-outs” (погулявцы), i.e. those who break self-isolation and quarantine regimes and go out;³ “contactless delivery” (бесконтактная доставка), when your pre-paid order arrives without you seeing the delivery man. These Russian coronaneologisms have emotional connotations of fear, excitement, tension, suspiciousness and anxiety, which makes them understandable to other nations. At the same time, they also convey a degree of black humour, another crisis response that is found cross-culturally (Breton and Polizzotti, 1997).

While many neologisms from both national contexts occur in social media, our study instead focuses on more “official” neologisms, which we feel might have the potential to continue in the language after the pandemic is over. Among these we particularly focus on two terms: *social distance/-ing* and *lockdown* which, insofar as they engage Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism heuristic parameter (Hofstede, op. cit.), afford possibilities for cultural comparison.

2. National character or national stereotypes?

It is hard to talk about generalities such as “national character” scientifically, and scientific research in this area suggests that perceptions of such things derive more from unsubstantiated stereotypes than from first-hand knowledge (McCrae and Terracciano, 2006). However, in this study we are not concerned with delineating the precise outlines of the British and Russian character; rather, the aim is to compare them through the lens of Hofstede’s cultural observations, especially as far as his individual/collective paradigm is concerned. This is defined in the following terms:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its

² Something similar occurs in British English, where “social distance” in the context of disease is very little used before the pandemic, but the term instead refers to differences in social class, in wealth and so on.

³ *Quarantikuily* is a combination of two words: quarantine plus *kanikuly* (holidays) denoting a period of days-off which were announced in Russia in the spring of 2020 during the deteriorating epidemiological situation.

opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 92)

In terms of personal identity, the distinction concerns whether this is determined by “personal choices and achievements, or by the character of the collective groups to which one is more or less permanently attached” (Smith and Bond, 1995).

Kumar (2006) argues that the experience of running a global empire was a factor in the development of certain character traits among the British, such as an assumption of modesty and self-effacement – both of which arguably masked a parallel presumption of superiority over all other races. Though generalizations based on such accounts are necessarily limited and unreliable, it is plain that Britain today is an individualistic country, its young people participating fully in the online excesses of the “Me generation” (Stein, 2013). As one of the foundational hubs of global capitalism and neo-liberal economics, moreover, Britain passes on to each generation of citizens an implicit ideology that embraces the values of hard work to better oneself, values that crystallize in the American concept of the “self-made man” (Mulholland, 2003), and support a vision of society as a place overwhelmingly driven by a competitive logic (Nicholls, 1989). In opposition to this self-centred focus, social phenomena such as the development of organized labour and Europe's first National Health Service may be put forward as evidence of other-orientation, a collective dimension to British society. However, it is impossible to deny that, since Margaret Thatcher's time in power, such structures have been under increasing pressure (Davies, Freeman and Pemberton, 2018). Though extreme, Thatcher's assertion that “there is no such thing as society” (Kalantzis and Cope, 2021) expresses a quite prevalent feeling among British people that it is better to rely on one's own resources than look to the state to guarantee means of subsistence. Britain, then, is generally considered, along with the USA, as an “individualistic” country *par excellence* (Tower et al., 1997, p. 334).

By contrast, Russia is a country where a 1983 study of young people's life goals (Karpukhin and Kutsenko, 1983, in Tower et al., 1997, p. 334) showed that they placed the creation of friendship networks above job satisfaction, family life and self-fulfilment. It is unclear whether this factor is a legacy of the Soviet era, or whether it refers to a more traditional aspect of the Russian psyche. Though, as we said above, we are not dealing with ideology in its specifically political meaning, it is impossible to pass over the fact that it is little more than 30 years since the events of 1989 which saw the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and led to the establishment of an ostensibly more liberal regime in Russia. Collectivism, putting the needs of the group before those of the individual, is probably the core value of communism (Douzinas, Žižek and Lee, 2010). This is expressed in countless ways in communist societies: the use of egalitarian address forms like “comrade”, and references in official discourse to “the people”, the role of governments in allocating resources for services like health, education and housing that are equally available to all citizens, irrespective of their income. This is, of course, an ideal representation, and this is not the place for an extensive discussion of the realities of life in Soviet Russia. However, it is worth noting that, in reaction to the excesses of Stalinism, the 1977 Brezhnev constitution attempted to institutionalize a collective ideology:

It was the duty of and a matter of honour for every able-bodied citizen to work conscientiously in his/her chosen, socially useful occupation, and strictly to observe work discipline. Socially useful work and its results determined a person's status in society. Evasion of socially useful work was incompatible with the principles of socialist society. (Kagarlickij, 2009)

Having lived under the communist system for many generations, it is unlikely that people would immediately jettison this collective mindset with its removal; and in any case, as studies already cited have claimed, there is something collective about the Russians' approach to life.

It is said that if two young Russians have a bottle of beer, they will not drink it together but instead will try to find a third to share it with. This anecdotal evidence might feature on a cultural script (Wierzbicka 1994, 2002) for the Russian national character. Russia, in short, is a country that, according to Tower et al (op. cit, p. 333) “embodied the values of collectivism”.

3. Data: A comparison of British and Russian Covid neologisms

3.1 Data (a) British context

British data comes from poems submitted to the Ledbury Poetry Festival in 2020. The festival describes itself as “the biggest, brightest, most superlatively international celebration of poetry and spoken word in the UK”.⁴ The 2020 edition of the festival included a section devoted to “lockdown poems”, which allows us to assess the impact of the pandemic on that part of the population interested in poetical expression: significantly, this does not comprise works by professional poets alone, but includes poems submitted by members of the public to an online call for contributions.⁵

We explore the poems in terms of their underlying ontologies, using a mixed methodology based, in part, on linguistic theorizations of proximization (Cap, 2006, 2014). The basic assumption of proximization is connected to the individual and collective phenomenon of personal space, and the concomitant psychological states of security and insecurity that follow when this is respected or invaded; hence, the methodology is especially well-suited to exploring the concept of social distance. Another useful series of heuristic tools is borrowed from Van Leeuwen’s (1996) work on the representation of social actors. Again, this is relevant to the data, with its recurring focus on the individuals’ relations with others, with society at large, at times with the redefinition of social roles and appropriate social distances. Linguistic notions of evaluation (Van Leeuwen *ibid*, Hunston and Thompson, 2003, Martin and White, 2007) are also considered, since this is another aspect of ordinary social relations thrown into uncertainty by the pandemic. Where evaluation relates to human behaviour, Martin and White use the term “propriety” to refer to those spheres of activity that fall within a deontological or moral/ethical compass. By focusing on such evaluations it is possible to assess prevailing sociological mores, to gauge what social practices are viewed as acceptable or unacceptable at any particular time, and the degrees of intensity involved in judging such behaviour. Crucially, while certain practices are always associated with positive or negative evaluations, others may be subject to variations according to details of the socio-historical context. In our case, it is plain that before the pandemic there was no opprobrium attached to circulating publicly without a face-mask, while negative evaluations, at times severe, were used during the pandemic for such cases.

As mentioned above, the abstraction of “national character” is impossible to assess with any precision, and comments regarding it are liable to be viewed as unreliable generalizations, influenced by stereotypical thinking. Having made this caveat clear, however, it is our hope that the choice to focus on poetical data may be worthwhile. According to the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, in fact, poetry encapsulates the “soul of the nation”; hence, it will be instructive, in the terms of our study, to focus on data that serves

To bind and interrogate this Proteus, which is usually called national character and which shows itself certainly not less in the writings than in the usages and actions of a nation – that is a high and beautiful philosophy. It is practised most surely in poetry; for in the works of imagination and feeling the entire soul of the nation reveals itself most freely. (Herder, in Berlin and Hardy, 2013, p. 268)

Here we focus on two of the most commonly encountered neologisms in this collection of poems and, indeed, in pandemic-related discourse generally; *lockdown* and *social distance*. For the purposes of the following discussion, Anglophone poems are labelled with the abbreviation “A” followed by a number, Russian by “R”.

⁴ Ledbury Poetry Festival: <https://www.poetry-festival.co.uk/about-the-festival/about-ledbury/>, accessed 17/08/2021. All poems provided and discussed within section 3.1 are available at the aforementioned address.

⁵ It is worth reminding the reader that we are not engaged in literary criticism; analysis therefore makes no reference to the aesthetic value, or lack thereof, of the works in question.

Thankful in lockdown by Isha Matharu (A1)

1	We all knew 2020 would be unique	We
2	The days turned into weeks, then months,	
3	The government repeatedly gave warnings of social distancing	Government
4	And the world sat there listening	The world
5	Today, I am thankful for family	I / family
6	But it is not just me, it is all of us internationally,	Me / all of us
7	Another reason of gratitude is technology,	
8	and all the scientists who studied biology	Scientists
9	And the people who right now work hardest of all	People
10	Are the NHS who stand up tall	The NHS
11	This is for all the people who have lost their jobs in this pandemic	Jobless people
12	And all those who are diabetic	Diabetics
13	and those who work as paramedics	Paramedics
14	This is for all the people suffering from COVID-19,	Covid sufferers
15	This is for those with bad hygiene	The unhygienic
16	This is to make you realize,	
17	That we should be thankful for those who we miss the most in this	Those we miss
18	time	

The text is remarkable for its constantly shifting focus across different social actors, so that even in a short space it makes specific mention of many, as we can see from the following list:

We / the government / the world / I / family / all of us / scientists / the people who work / the NHS / the jobless / diabetics / paramedics / Covid sufferers / the unhygienic / those we miss

The main focus of evaluations concern what Martin and White (2005) refer to as “Affect”, as the writer depicts their emotional state and how this is impacted by the unfolding scenario of the pandemic. Moreover, the other main group of evaluative tokens, which relate to human behaviour, tend to feed directly into the emotive discourse that is the writer’s main concern here. For example, “those who work as paramedics”, a statement which tags the social actors in question with positive ethical/moral qualities, are referenced as another reason justifying the writer’s “thankfulness”. The same applies to the reference to the government – we are invited to feel thankful (a reaction at the emotive level) – for the government’s efficiency in providing appropriate behavioural guidelines. What emerges is the writer’s sense of gratitude towards a whole range of social actors, as well as sympathy for those suffering (*jobless*, *diabetics*, *paramedics*, etc.). The writer’s sense of social involvement is also signalled in the use of the plural pronoun “we” in the opening, which makes immediate reference to a common, rather than an individualistic, dimension of experience. In other words, then, “lockdown” as represented here, focuses not on the writer’s personal experience, but rather provides an opportunity for reflection on the shared, participatory nature of national circumstances at this particular time.

Lockdown March 2020 by Sarala Estruch

1	Suddenly we are all aliens.	We / aliens
2	We've woken up foreigners	We / foreigners
3	on a planet we believed	We
4	belonged to us but today,	Us
5	has been declared off limits.	
6	We can only visit,	We
7	this new hushed landscape,	
8	through state sanctioned	The state
9	daily walks. It's awkward!	
10	The new social distancing	
11	methods. Crossing the road	
12	when we spot a person	We / A person
13	up ahead – indiscriminately	
14	now; suddenly everyone	Everyone
15	is a threat. Trying to explain	
16	this to our children. Scolding them	Our children / them
17	for running up to the postman	The postman
18	or the neighbour,	The neighbour
19	Reminding them, <i>two metres!</i>	Them
20	<i>Two metres!</i> Trying to keep	
21	the smile on our faces.	
22	We envy our children, sauntering	We / Our children
23	cheerfully, so quick to adjust	
24	to playdates on Zoom, oblivious	
25	(of course) to the real situation.	
26	From our windows,	
27	we observe the carrion crow,	We / the carrion crow
28	whose call can be heard	
29	so clearly now	
30	in the new enforced silence,	
31	as it sits on a branch	It – the carrion crow
32	bejewelled with buds	
33	and unfurling green sprouts:	
34	This new life we cannot touch	We

In this poem, as a glance at the social actors column confirms, the dominant perspective is that represented by the first-person plural pronoun. As with the first poem, the writer is expressing her own experience during lockdown, but claiming to speak for everyone: indeed, this use of “we” is not necessarily restricted to the entire Anglophone social group, but potentially has a global resonance: *We've woken up foreigners on a planet we believed belonged to us* (2-4). This inclusivity of reference applies to experiences that are mutual in a factual sense, such as only being allowed out under certain conditions (6-9), but it also extends to matters which would appear, under normal circumstances, to be in the domain of strictly individual experience. Details of the writer's daily activities – crossing a road to avoid a meeting, explaining things to her children, listening to a bird's call – are all referred to as shared experiences through the mutuality of plural pronoun reference.

In the terms of proximization theory, it is noticeable that the writer vividly specifies the exact bounds of personal space which are not to be violated: “*two metres! Two metres!*” (19-20), the urgency underlined by the use of exclamation marks. Again in this sense, they specify the social actors who are

potentially infringing these boundaries – a person up ahead (12-13), everyone (14), the postman (17), the neighbour (18). Thus the danger moves from the context of encounters in the street towards the home; closer, in other words, to the writer's everyday safe space. This sense of increased threat associated with the other is in contrast with the social solidarity implicit in the choice of pronoun, and the tension breaks through in the lines: *Trying to keep the smile on our faces* (20-21). Social conventions dictate smiling as the appropriate response to chance meetings of the kind described here, and these conventions are shown as hard to maintain in the current climate, where the threat of infection is known to increase in proportion to the lowering of social distance.

Socially Distanced by Michael Lawrence

1	It's Sunday morning. The sky	
2	is the colour it does best.	
3	I have changed the contents	I
4	of the cats' litter trays and	The cats
5	disinfected what needs	
6	disinfecting. Now I sit here	I
7	in my brown leather chair,	
8	ankles crossed on its matching	
9	footstool, cup of cappuccino	
10	at my elbow, scrawling this.	
11	A small buzzing that's not	
12	my ears, a bee or wasp	A bee or wasp
13	my weak eyes can't locate,	
14	otherwise quiet in an old	
15	farmhouse at the end of a long	
16	well-pitted track a world	
17	and worlds away from other	Other people
18	people's versions of isolation,	
19	socially distanced by	
20	scribbles in a pad.	

Here the focus is much more on the central character, the narrator, as we see immediately from a glance at the social actors involved – by comparison with the other poems, there are very few. “I” is the only human directly involved in the poem, most of which focuses on the character himself who is sitting, drinking a cappuccino and writing the poem. We are, perhaps, invited to feel sorry for the writer in this lonely state, and details such as his household chores (3-6), his buzzing ears (11), weak eyes (13), the fact that he does not “write” his poem but rather “scrawls” (10) or “scribbles” (20) it, suggest that the pervading emotional state could be that of self-pity. Against this background alone is it possible to accurately interpret the ambiguous opening:

It's Sunday morning. The sky
is the colour it does best

The “natural” colour of the sky is blue but here, one imagines, a sort of depressing shade of British grey is indicated.

In terms of proximization theory, it is noticeable that the writer positions himself at a great distance from others, “at the end of a long, well-pitted track” (15-16), not simply “a world” (16) but even “worlds” away (17). Again, it is striking that he is not situated at this great distance from, for example, “other people”, or busy city streets – rather, the distance is from “other people's versions of isolation” (17-18). In this sense, the poet displays the same other-orientation that we noted in the other poems, a similar attempt to claim that their own current personal experience is shared by all – he speaks of “versions” of isolation, but all are isolated. In the final lines, “social distance” appears not in precise contours as it did in “Lockdown March 2020” (“two metres!”); rather, it is a psychological distance reinforced in the writer's mind through the act of writing the poem.

3.2 Data (b): Russophone context

Russian data comes from poems submitted to the Russian 2020 online project “Coronaverse: Poems of the Covid-19 period”.⁶ The project aims to bring together Russian poets and writers from across the world who seek to describe, in poetical form, the feelings experienced during the lockdown by many ordinary Russian people, if not by society at large.

Quarantine by Alexander Gorodnitsky (R1)

1	We've been staying in quarantine for the umpteenth day,	We
2	The day is fine, with birds singing,	Birds
3	And I'd like to go out, but it's forbidden to go out to have some fresh air.	I
4	There are no particular reasons for joy:	
5	You open the Internet in the morning	You
6	Just to find out that there has been a surge in casualties	
7	Should we stay in waiting for the virus to kill us?	We
8	We've been staying in quarantine for the umpteenth day,	We
9	And wine doesn't give you optimism,	You
10	You can see concerned faces on the screen,	You
11	You are made to look at your friend as a foe,	You..your friend..a foe
12	Who threatens to infect you.	You
13	We were taught to deal with any situation in the navy,	We
14	However, now you can see nothing but eerie darkness.	You
15	This battle is going to be a lot more difficult,	
16	With the enemy everywhere.	The enemy
17	We've been staying in quarantine for the umpteenth day,	We
18	And in my mind's eye I go back again to the frosty and empty Leningrad	I
19	When I wake up I begin to think that we'll weather the pandemic	I..we
20	As we once survived the siege of Leningrad.	We

The pessimistic tone of the poem reflects the poet's gloomy and depressed state of mind with the constant *We've been staying in quarantine for the umpteenth day* refrain (1,8,17). Such metaphors (*no particular reasons for joy*, *concerned faces on the screen*, *eerie darkness*) are used to express the author's feelings of uncertainty, hopelessness and despair (- Affect), a tragic finale (10), the end of illusions (10).

The shared experiences during both lockdown and “the siege of Leningrad” are referred to through the mutuality of plural pronoun reference (“we”, 20). The writer, who is obviously an elderly person, expresses a common view of the absurdity of some social restrictions such as the ban on *fresh air* (3), the unacceptability of pitting people against one another (to look at your friend as your foe, 11). The war metaphors, which often characterize the attitude of the Russians to landmark events (Chudinov et al 2015) include a “surge in casualties” (6), a virus that can kill us (7), “the enemy everywhere” (16), and have a clear pragmatic connotation: we are at war with coronavirus, and we will survive. The poem ends on an optimistic note (+ Affect), as the author seeks to raise the morale of the Russian people, by using a named event from the past (proximization) – the siege of Leningrad, which has strong associations in the minds of the Russians, especially the elderly. Comparing the pandemic with this historical event is a rhetorical technique which brings us back to our common glorious past, by resurrecting the traditional Russian feelings of national pride, patriotism and courage (+ Affect), that are of great value in times of crises and represent the concept of collectivism.

⁶ Online at: <https://coronaviruspoetry.com/>, last visit 14/05/2022

In Lockdown by Victor Yesipov (R2)

1	All together we are in lockdown,	We
2	To be more precise, under house arrest.	
3	You can listen either to Rossini or Vivaldi on youtube.	You..Rossini..Vivaldi
4	I'm looking out of the window and see	I
5	That the trees are getting green, two crows are fighting for a free branch.	Two crows
6	And our property is limited by a balcony,	
7	Where you can make three steps forward and four steps back.	You
8	A small free space, which you probably have too,	You
9	Is a symbol of our yesterday's freedom,	
10	A tragic finale, the end of illusions,	
11	And years pass, all best years, people pass away too.	People

The sense of togetherness and collectivism is expressed not only through the first-person plural pronoun (1), but through description of a new common routine which is perceived collectively as *house arrest* (2), *a symbol of our yesterday's freedom* (9). Evidently, staying in lockdown is associated with prison, deprivation of freedom and disillusionment, with the generally pessimistic tone of the poem (- Affect). However, to brighten up the days one can enjoy listening to classical music, which is viewed as cold comfort for many people deprived of their daily routine.

In terms of proximization, the exact bounds of personal space are specified by a balcony as most Russians live in flats with balconies, another clear reference to collective experiences and past times.

The expression, *three steps forward and four steps back*, is an allusion to a Russian idiom describing an indecisive person or timid policies: making one step forward, a hesitant person backs away slowly. The idiom, common in English too, in Russian takes its origins from Lenin's work "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back",⁷ and referring to it in the poem underlines the common Soviet legacy which has penetrated all spheres of our lives.

Dawn by Julia Kovalchuk (R3)⁸

1	We believe that the dawn will come soon,	We
2	We are waiting for it,	We
3	We'll take a breath after going through these troubles	We
4	And we'll bring back our old life.	We
5	The sun will be even brighter in spring,	
6	Children's laughter will be heard again in the streets,	Children
7	Making everyone warm and glad.	Everyone
8	We know that our doctors, sparing no effort,	We..our doctors
9	Are saving people's lives during the day and at night.	People
10	And we are grateful to all of them.	We..all of them
11	People, lift your spirits,	People
12	It's not easy to break us.	Us
13	We'll go through this time of troubles together	We
14	And start from the beginning.	
15	We believe that the dawn will come soon.	We
16	It will come with the 9 th of May Parade	
17	And we hope that the hospital will become empty	We
18	And no one will die any more.	No-one

Some of the social actors are the people (11), doctors (8) and children (6), all of whom have vital roles to play in the lockdown. The collective dimension is immediately established here by the opening three lines, which all begin with "we", a recurrent note throughout (1-4,8,10,13,15,17). The typical address in Russian cultural discourse to the people traditionally implies the idea of solidarity, firmness

⁷ The text of Lenin's essay on the state of the Communist Party is available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/index.htm>, last visit 14/05/2022.

⁸ By contrast with the others, not a professional poet.

of mind and bravery in the face of the common enemy, and therefore has a clear pragmatic connotation. Gratitude to doctors is common in all cultures, with the Russian being no exception. The image of laughing children gives you feelings of warmth and joy (+ Affect), which are so much needed in times of trouble. It also symbolizes the return to a normal emotional state of mind.

The author makes immediate reference to a common, rather than an individualistic, dimension of past experience by alluding to the 9th of May Parade, celebrating victory over the Nazis, which has a powerful symbolic meaning in Russian history and culture. Unlike the second poem, the overall mood of this poem is optimistic and encouraging, with reference to collective morale and collective victory in the Great Patriotic War, a symbol for the hoped-for victory over the virus.

Quarantine Summer by Irene Aks (R4)

1	Alas, all cafes are closed,	
2	We are deprived of our usual way of spending our leisure time.	We
3	How should we rest? How should we live without each other?	We..each other
4	Boozing alone is not interesting,	
5	But thank God, it's summertime which means we can meet outdoors,	We
6	In parks, where nature is most beautiful and the sky is bright.	
7	We'll get together in the park <u>keeping a three-step distance</u> ,	We
8	Neither closer nor farther than three steps,	
9	And we'll accept this world.	We
10	Let's have a great weekend and seize the day,	
11	As we can see each other in person, not from the screens.	We

The deprivation of a social practice like “going to cafes with friends” is viewed negatively (“Alas”, - Affect (1). People are suddenly at a loss as they are deprived of their usual routine, and it's not easy for them to adapt to the new normal. However, meeting in the park in the summertime raises positive associations and offers a glimmer of hope for a return to the usual routine. In terms of proximization, it is noticeable that the writer specifies the exact bounds of personal space by “keeping a three-step distance, neither closer nor farther” and accepts this restriction. The reference to “boozing alone” (4) recalls the proverb about Russian's preference for communal drinking mentioned above.

4. Discussion

Here we compare the two sets of poems using the tools described above; pronoun reference, social actors, proximization, evaluation, with reference to the notions of cultural stereotypes regarding the two national groups.

The penultimate Russian poem uses the first-person plural pronoun, the writer thereby claiming that her emotions are shared by the entire social group (“we believe that the dawn will soon come”): this is certainly what cultural stereotyping might lead us to expect; however, the same can also be observed of two of the Anglophone poems. “Thankful in Lockdown” begins “We all knew 2020 would be unique”: the only credible interpretation of the pronoun here is that it refers to the entire nation. Thus, the poem claims to speak for all, and the writer's own gratitude towards the multitude of social actors included is amplified, spread across the whole of the country. “Lockdown March 2020” does something similar, opening with lines that describe not a personal, subjective experience, but something collective:

Suddenly we are all aliens. We've woken up foreigners on a planet we believed belonged to us (A2)

In both these Anglophone poems, the inclusive force of the pronoun is underlined by addition of the determiner “all”. In this second poem, the focus is consistently collective, with a “we” or an “our” in all but one of the stanzas, to continually remind the reader that what is described is a mutual, not a personal, experience. However, in the Russian poems, this dimension is fundamental; it is present in all three poems, and each opens with a “we” in the first line. The aspect of shared, national experience is further underlined by references to wartime events that are celebrated today. In the last two lines of “Quarantine”, for example:

we'll weather the pandemic
As we once survived the siege of Leningrad (R1)

Here the second “we” is, from a logical perspective, fallacious; “we”, i.e., the Russian people currently living through the pandemic did not survive the siege of Leningrad, since *we* were not present. The sense requires an extension of the idea of nation, to encompass all future, past and present members in a timeless union. The writer evokes this idea of nation; he could have written, for example, “as our ancestors once survived”. Here the pronoun works to compress time differences (this is also an operation of proximization), to associate the values of a former period with the current situation. The pronoun “you” has analogous features; it is indirect, inclusive, and again permits the writer to generalize from their own experience to embrace a collective perspective.

You open the Internet in the morning (R1 – 5)

You can see concerned faces on the screen,
You are made to look at your friend as a foe,
Who threatens to infect you (R1 – 10–11)

You can listen either to Rossini or Vivaldi on youtube (R2 – 3)

This generic “you”, is “always inclusive” (van der Auwera 2012, p. 80), thus what is represented are common, shared experiences, things that other people do and think, just like the author. This collective dimension of “you” is not present in the Anglophone poems. Another difference concerns the pronoun “I”. In the Russian poems, the dimension of personal experience is present (“I’m looking out of the window”, R2 – 4; “When I wake up I begin to think”, R1 – 19); however, these are isolated points of personal reflection in what is, as we have seen, a generally collective landscape. In the Anglophone poems, this perspective is also found, in A1: at line 5, “Today, I am thankful for family”. However, A3, with its consistent focus on personal experience, stands out in this respect; here, we are concerned with one person communicating their own personal sensations which are not generalizable at all; on the contrary, as the writer himself says, other people will have “their own versions” of isolation. Instead of claiming to speak for all, then, this writer is speaking only for himself.

We have already mentioned proximization in the Anglophone poems, above, in comments following each poem. The Russian poets also play with space and time: the dawn, metaphorically standing for the end of Covid and returning normality, is brought forward (R3), and significant past military events (R2, R3) are brought into the present. Spatial proximization in R2 is combined with the temporal:

A small free space, which you probably have too,
Is a symbol of our yesterday’s freedom

Here “yesterday” does not have a literal meaning but figuratively refers to a time before the beginning of the pandemic, when we were “free”. There are, perhaps, other connotations to this reference. The writer mentions the balcony, a feature of typical Soviet-era housing, and reminds readers that they probably live somewhere very similar. He goes on to write of “A tragic finale, the end of illusions, And years pass, all best years”. Do these lines, then, refer to Soviet Russia, a period of “illusions” which has, tragically, come to an end? Again, the spatial dimension in the line immediately preceding these:

a balcony, where you can make three steps forward and four steps back

underlines the individual futility of experience during lockdown, while also arguably evoking ghosts of a political experiment that failed to produce the expected results.

Interestingly, the Anglophone poems seem to focus on a wider range of social actors, especially A1. In the Russian poems, social actors are generic: your friend, a foe, the navy, the enemy (R1), children, doctors, people (R3). The exceptions to this are Rossini and Vivaldi, cases of what van Leeuwen (1995) calls “nomination”, who are cultural icons rather than real people who do things. From this perspective, the comparative absence of social actors in the Russian poems creates a different dynamic from

the Anglophone group, where the writers' focus creates a variegated sense of activity, of people moving about:

... the scientists who studied biology

... the people who right now work hardest of all

the people suffering from COVID-19 (A1)

... Scolding them
for running up to the postman

... our children, sauntering cheerfully (A2)

Even the third poem has somebody doing something: I sit here in my brown leather chair (A3). From the individual/collective perspective, then, the representation of social actors appears to confirm stereotype-based hypotheses, with a greater emphasis on the individual, his perspectives and actions, found in the Anglophone group.

In terms of Affect, finally, there are common features across the two national groups. Predictably, there are feelings of anxiety (A2, 11-12; R1, 5-6), fear (A2, 14-15; R1, 7), and depression (A3, the whole poem; R1, 4; R2, the whole poem). There are also positive emotions such as hope (A2, 30-34; R3, the whole poem), gratitude, found only in A1, and pride (R1, 20; R3, 16-18). Of interest here are these last two factors; pride, in the Russian poems, is directed towards the evocation of past national glories, a conception of the mother/fatherland as triumphant in war. The individual in these episodes is represented as subsumed by the collective dimension – in R1, the writer mentions experiences in the navy, and during the siege of Leningrad. Meanwhile, the gratitude in the first Anglophone poem is directed at the writer's immediate family circle, before it moves outwards to address a wide range of individual social actors.

5. Conclusion

The relevance of the perspectives outlined in this paper is underlined by the comments of UK academic and government adviser Stephen Reicher during the pandemic: "it is frightening to have a 'health' secretary who wants to make all protections a matter of personal choice when the key message of the pandemic is: this isn't an 'I' thing, it's a 'we' thing" (Geddes, 2021).

It is clearly unrealistic, in such a small-scale study, to look for ambitious conclusions, to generalize about national characteristics, or even to suggest that the attitudes displayed here are in some way representative of the way the two national groups are responding to the pandemic. No doubt, from the many poems in both collections, it would have been possible to assemble different comparisons, supportive of different findings. What we have tried to do is to suggest research pathways that might allow us to explore the macro-cultural perspectives of Wierzbicka and Hofstede, to give some semblance of linguistic support to such broad general notions. Arguably, our findings suggest differences in emphasis between the two groups of poems, that afford some informal confirmation of these stereotypical outlines. This, of course, is not the same thing as arguing that these stereotypes have some foundation in the psychological realities of each national group.

The third Anglo poem, for example, depicts an individual whose only preoccupation is with himself. A social perspective on the pandemic as a collective tragedy is altogether absent; we are supposed to suspend our focus on such matters and pity this poor chap with weak eyes in his isolation. But this self-preoccupation, as we have seen, cannot be called a *typical* feature of the Anglo poems, since the other poems do take a keen interest in social aspects of the pandemic.

Likewise, we should hesitate before concluding, after considering the Russian poems with their proud military memories, that this collective dimension is in some way an aspect of Russian national character. The second Russian poem, with its melancholy portrait of a man walking up and down a tiny balcony, has something in common with the self-absorbed Englishman, even if in this case the writer suggests that his readers are probably having similar experiences.

What this data does is provide an opportunity to observe how the two national groups conceptualize the experiences symbolized in two neologisms, “lockdown” and “social distance”, and the patterns of meaning associated with these terms by each group. Definitive confirmation or denial of the cultural realities behind national stereotypes would necessarily be a cross-disciplinary project that has not as yet been attempted, as far as we know, in any cultural context.

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