The Image of Russian Business through Linguistic Stereotypical Means

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Abstract

This article deals with the peculiarities of written representation of Russian business in English-language print media. Full-text articles from "The Economist", published between 2008 and 2014, were selected to analyze the semantics of words and word combinations that imply a Russian business reality. All units were classified according to topic-relation and language sources of stereotypes. The findings showed that the topic-related stereotypes focus on representation of people in three areas – government, business, and realia. As for the linguistic perspective, figurative means are the basic sources for stereotypes, with the emphasis on similes and metaphors of people. Reference sources for figurative means and morphologic means are business-related. Though negative linguistic stereotypes prevail, there are rare positive stereotypes, expressed through syntax. Thus, linguistic stereotypical means help to create the image of Russian business in simplified categories and underlined contrasts: stereotypical lexical units of well-being are combined with characteristics of a poorly-kept country. The intercultural implication of the study is the necessity of enhanced awareness of stereotyping potential of media language.

Keywords: *language means, media stereotypes, the image of Russian business, the Economist*

Introduction

Media have become an essential means of forming social perception (Language 2003; Seiter 1986). With technological advancements, business media increase their functioning space and effect on readers (Volodina, Karpukhina 2002). Globalization as the major contributing process to the development of international business links helps in understanding how specific national business is covered by world mass media. It contributes to the formation of stereotypes by spreading information through a largely distributed business source. On the other hand, reports are supposed to be of the most important business events, and both impartial and unbiased (Anikina, 2007).

The term stereotype, as conceptualized by the social psychologist Walter Lippman, means a 'picture in the head' (Stereotypes and stereotyping 1996:3), a readily available image of a given social group, usually based on rough, often negative generalizations.

Although stereotypes can be positive as well as negative, they are, in everyday usage, most often understood as irrationally based negative attitudes about certain social groups and their members. Seemingly neutral stereotypes frequently prevent mutual understanding and bring regrettable results when transferred from an idiosyncratic individual one to a whole society (Nachbar, Laus 1992).

All spheres of life are stereotyped. The objects of stereotyping in a particular social domain are of significance to study, especially in terms of finding culture specific features in this process. Thus, it is important to consider what topics (social reference) in a specific domain of another culture are touched upon when being stereotyped.

Stereotypes rely on many factors such as age, gender, race, religion, profession and nationality. They are also believed to be an essential part of the mass communication, both in written and verbal forms

(Aitchison, Lewis 2003). The importance of language in transmission and maintenance of cultural stereotypes is stressed by scholars (Van Dijk 1984; Lämsä, Tiensu 2002; Wigboldus, Douglas 2007); in case of "The Economist" stereotypes are shared by the English-speaking (business) society and widely used/referred to.

This paper deals with the peculiarities of written representation of Russian business in English-language print media. Despite the relevance of the study, little research has analyzed productive English linguistic patterns in relation ("The Economist", the United Kingdom) to the topic or situation in another country. Existing research suggests that the specifics of national peculiarities in linguistic representation largely depend on evaluation and business dimension in question (Kostareva 2004). However, no prior study has systematically compared verbal representation topic-related units with linguistic sources of stereotypes which, in turn, would help to explain not only associative features of the image of Russian business in business media, but also which particular language means are to be considered to create awareness of stereotyping potential of media language.

In this paper we compare linguistic stereotypes in two ways when they are related to media texts. Mediated language is stereotyped in 1) speech production and 2) language representation of the social (Language, 2003).

The issue of 'stereotypical' requires reconsideration in the view of social perception. As verbal representation is *analogically* related with human action (Vygotsky 2002) it is particularly important to consider 'stereotypes' in media texts as they form and serve as the basis for social perception. We believe it is possible to study the texts through a 'stereotypical prism' of categories and we assume that media text can be referred to as mass communication text.

The 'collective mind' may be regarded as stereotypical (linguistically idiomatic) because it bears the same features of a stereotype: a) unification of a large variety; b) identical circumstances for human action in both public and interpersonal domains; c) similarity of individuals; d) elimination of redundant traits due to lack of incentives to use them; e) creation of new circumstances to use identical features more effectively (Grushin 1987:173-175).

Language stereotypes are based on the same model: signification (with both rational and emotional evaluation) of reality by the analogue with a typical situation, compression of verbal representation (language mechanism), and the use of a verbal unit (nomination) as the most essential part of perception and expression with the elimination of insignificant associations (Human factor 1992: 137).

To recap, the 'collective mind' and stereotypes in media may be regarded as 'parallel' in the following dimensions: 1) *limitation* of language by the situation; 2) unification of the variety in *intentional* nomination (with both rational and emotional components); 3) re/production of language in other contexts (*secondary use*/derivatives).

Procedure and Analysis

We focus on ways the image of Russian business developed in the English-language print media. The articles from "The Economist" published between 2008-2014, covering Russian economy and business, were selected to analyze the semantics of words and word combinations that imply a Russian business reality. These are classified according to topic-relation and language sources of stereotypes. After the analysis, the former is correlated with the later to conclude which English-based language models are the most productive. In the final part, conclusions and recommendations are offered. Briefly, the content of analysis is outlined below (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: *Topic relation*

	Topics	Examples

1.1.	**Government**	
1.1.1.	*Public figures*	Putin
1.1.2.	*Government structures*	KGB
1.1.3.	*Government policies*	Putinism
1.2.	**Business**	
1.2.1.	*Businessmen*	Khodorkovsky
1.2.2.	*Types of business*	The biggest steel company
1.2.3.	*Commodities*	Oil and gas
1.3.	**Realia**	
1.3.1.	*Wealth*	Money
1.3.2.	*Poor well-being*	Pain
1.3.3.	*Cuisine*	Vodka
1.3.4.	*Personification*	Story-teller
1.3.5.	*History*	Perestroika
1.3.6.	*Miscellaneous*	perpetuum mobile

According to the analysis, topic-related verbal representations are included into three main groups: government (1.1), business (1.2) and Russian realia (1.3).

The ***Government*** group (1.1.) consists of three subgroups: public figures (1.1.1), government structures (1.1.2) and government policies (1.1.3).

Public figures (1.1.1). Although the selected articles are business and economic by nature, politics are a very prevalent topic, represented by proper names of famous politicians. It is interesting to note that the most frequently mentioned and cited are the heads of the Russia government: *Mr. Putin* and *Mr. Medvedev*. Their images are usually represented ironically.

> **Example 1:** Mr. Putin like a super hero in sports jacket (Dec 5, 2009).

> **Example 2:** Igor Sechin, a longtime Putin confidant, […] is in charge of Rosneft … (Oct 4, 2014)

> **Example 3:** *Government structures* (1.1.2) are mainly represented by a broad concept of 'the Kremlin'. In this case the Kremlin symbolizes an almighty complex organization.

> **Example 1:** To contain social discontent, the Kremlin puts heavy pressure on regional governments and firms not to lay off people or close plants, even if they are dinosaurs. (Jun

4, 2009)

Other governmental institutions such as the prosecution office, anti-monopoly service, anti-corruption committee and the KGB play the role of the Kremlin supporters in the media texts.

> **Example 1:** To assert his supremacy Mr Putin chose Mechel, a steel giant listed in New York, with a market value of $15.2 billion. On July 24th Mr Putin publicly accused Mechel and its main shareholder, Igor Zyuzin, of selling its coking coal abroad more cheaply than at home and dodging taxes. He was particularly irritated that Mr Zyuzin, who was summoned to a government meeting, was said to be ill. "Of course, illness is illness, but I think he should get well as soon as possible. Otherwise, we will have to send him (Igor Zyuzin) a doctor and clean up all the problems," said Mr Putin. Perhaps the prosecution office and anti-monopoly service should investigate, he added. (Jul 31, 2008)

> **Example 2:** Whereas oligarchs in Boris Yeltsin's time were private businessmen who influenced the running of the state, the Putin-era oligarchs are former KGB men who have used state power to grab private businesses. (Feb 1, 2014)

Government policies (1.1.3). Business policies in Russia are often stereotyped by media as *putinism*, an authoritarian regime of the Russian president Vladimir Putin, to negatively denote much of the political and financial powers being controlled by *siloviki*. These are people with a background in state security and intelligence agencies, for example, the FSB, the police and the army.

> **Example 1:** The arrest of Mr Khodorkovsky marked the final revanche, already building for some time, of Russia's nomenklatura. Yet unlike in the Soviet Union, which was run by a civilian gerontocracy in its later days, this would be a new generation of power-brokers: the *siloviki*, so named for their backgrounds in the security and intelligence services. (Oct 25, 2013)

The **Business** group (1.2) includes three topics: businessmen (1.2.1), types of business (1.2.2) and commodities (1.2.3).

Businessmen (1.2.1). The articles contain weighty quotations of professionals in the sphere of economy and business, adding significance to the information given. Research indicates that Russian business is closely associated with Russian oligarchs, rich people ('world famous money-grubbing tycoons'*)*, who usually have some problems either with the government ('bad oligarchs') or with the law, looking for the foreign protection. The good ones are those who 'submit to the Kremlin and join the ranks of its loyal friends'.

> **Example 1:** The transformation of Mr Khodorkovsky from a ruthless oligarch, operating in a virtually lawless climate, into a political prisoner (Apr 22, 2010)

> **Example 2:** A fresh trial of Russia's jailed oligarch (Apr 02, 2009)

> **Example 3:** The Kremlin is bailing out the business tycoon (Dec 03, 2009)

Types of business (1.2.2). Russian business is mainly treated like a local one, which has little to do with international business and therefore does not play a significant role in the world business arena. Hence, Russian companies are called *firms*, not corporations, diminishing the impression of Russian business in English-speaking media.

> **Example 1:** Russian firms will need to restructure hefty debts (Feb 02, 2009)

Commodities (1.2.3). Media topics reflect the European market's interest in Russian oil and gas.

> **Example 1:** Because <u>oil and gas</u> make up around half of government income, the Kremlin's ability to buy itself social and political stability is at stake. (Oct 4, 2014)

The **Russian realia** group (1.3) is represented by the categories of wealth (1.3.1) and poverty (1.3.2), meal/cuisine (1.3.3), personification (1.3.4), history (1.3.5) and objects (1.3.6).

Wealth (1.3.1) and *poor well-being* (1.3.2). The wealth image of Russia is drawn by the nominations 'money', 'richness', and 'wellbeing'. On the contrary, in business articles, the image of Russia has characteristics of a very ill country, treated more like a patient doomed to death or disability. These ideas can be easily shown in the lexis: 'lean hope', 'dying', 'probably survive', 'recovery', 'subsist on a drip-feed'.

> **Example 1:** As the <u>pain</u> spreads through the economy, the Kremlin is appealing to an unlikely constituency: the oligarchs. (Mar 19, 2009)

> **Example 2:** RUSSIA may not have democratic elections or the rule of law, but it does have one long-standing institution that works: corruption… Far from being a taboo subject, corruption is discussed openly by politicians, people and even the media—but it makes no difference… Corruption has become so <u>endemic</u> that it is perceived as normal. Opinion polls show that the majority of Russians, particularly the young, do not consider bribery <u>a crime</u>. The Russian language distinguishes between "offering a reward" to a bureaucrat for making life easier for you, and the brazen (and sometimes violent) extraction of a bribe by a bureaucrat. (Nov 27, 2008)

Cuisine (1.3.3). The image of Russian business is created by linguistic elements of both positive and negative shades, though the latter are more numerous. It influences the public opinion presented by media with the help of negatively estimated notions frequently used in national and cultural phraseological units and idioms.

> **Example 1:** But Russia has no intention of putting up the price of the traditional source of hangovers: vodka. (Oct 22, 2009)

Personification (1.3.4). In this topic category, Russia is personified through means associated with all previous categories – poor wellbeing, authorities, etc. Thus, Russia is 'a bad story teller' and 'a sick person'.

> **Example 1:** one of the more intriguing <u>tales</u> in post-communist Russia (Apr 22, 2010)

> **Example 2:** While admitting a vast array of problems, from economic weakness to alcoholism, he <u>painted a picture of a Russia with nuclear-powered spaceships and supercomputers</u>. In short, if Russia managed to modernise, it would once again become <u>a world leader</u>. (Mar 11, 2010)

> **Example 3:** As Mr Putin has said, <u>Russia should present a smiling face to the world</u>. (May 20, 2010)

History (1.3.5). Topic-related stereotypes are based on contradictions. On the one hand, in the economic domain Russia tries to present 'a new, smiling face' to the world, but on the other hand, media continue to refer to the country of Soviet times and other past historic contexts.

Example 1: Unlike <u>Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness</u>, which was inseparable from domestic liberalisation, Russia's new détente implies no political change at home. (May 20, 2010)

Miscellaneous (1.3.6). The topic of non-culture specific objects is infrequent in business media, yet it is used to create a negative stereotype of international business when Russia plays a part.

Example 1: It is being discussed as part of the so-called Corfu process, but one European politician likens it to <u>a *perpetuum mobile*</u> that will go on forever without reaching a conclusion. (May 20, 2010)

The second part of the research includes the analysis of language sources of stereotype (Table 2), represented at all linguistic levels – morphologic (2.1), lexical (2.2), and syntactic (2.3).

Table 2: *Language sources*

	Language levels	**Examples**
2.1.	**Morphology**	
2.1.1.	*Suffix*	Kremlinomics
2.1.2.	*Prefix*	Unacknowledged giant
2.2.	**Lexis**	
2.2.1.	*Phraseology*	Rosy picture
2.2.2.	*Borrowing*	Siloviki
2.3.	**Syntax**	
2.3.1.	*Emphatic word order*	Modernization is the thing Russia needs
2.4.	**Figures of speech**	
2.4.1.	*Simile and metaphor*	like a wise business runner, a new sick man
2.4.2.	*Epithet*	Tragicomic destruction

Media language stereotypes at the level of **morphology** (2.1) are represented by affixation.

Suffixation (2.1.1) as a type of word formation is widely spread in media texts. The data provide two so-called international suffixes (-ics and –ism), though potentially there are more (-ize for verbs, -holic for adjectives and nouns, etc).

Example 1: <u>Kremlinomics</u>: Why the Russian markets have fared worse than others (Oct 16, 2008)

Example 2: <u>Putinism</u> was made strong by the absence of resistance from the part of society that was meant to provide intellectual opposition. (Aug 07, 2008)

The word *Kremlinomics* is derived by adding the suffix –nomics to the word 'Kremlin' which refers to the metonymic denotation of power and authority in Russia. The word is used to 'describe economic policies which alludes to the communist policies of the Russian government during the Cold War and is by all accounts considered an unwanted connotation in industrialized nations. The term *Kremlinomic*s gained popularity during the early months of the Obama administration in the United States' (Investopedia, 2010).

Putinism, denoting a Russian nationalistic authoritarian form of government that pretends to be a free market democracy, is also related to the topic relation of the authority figure Vladimir Putin, the name is suffixed with –ism.

Prefix (2.1.2). The study shows two the most frequently used prefixes to form linguistic stereotypes: un- (=not, opposite or reverse) and re- (=again or back).

> **Example 1:** The <u>unacknowledged</u> giant (Jun 17, 2010)

> **Example 2:** Russia today is much freer than it was for most of the Soviet era. However <u>undemocratic</u> it may be, it is not a totalitarian state. (Aug 7, 2008)

> **Example 3:** Russia's return to business as usual was made easier by Barack Obama's <u>reset</u> policy (seen in Moscow as an admission of past mistakes) and the shelving of NATO expansion. The financial crisis has also shown up Russia's vulnerability. (May 20, 2010)

The prefixed words are used as parts of other linguistic forms to build stereotypes: epithets and attributes (*unacknowledged giant, undemocratic state*, *reset policy*), business terms and vocabulary (*creeping renationalization, debt was repaid, debt restructuring*), and the combination of the former and the latter (*unavoidable debt*).

Lexis (2.2)

Phraseologic units (2.2.1) can be powerful linguistic means in the media to stereotype as they deliver both informative and emotional content in a compressed form.

> **Example 1:** <u>Oil's well that ends well</u>: The logic behind a huge Russian oil deal (Apr 27, 2009)

> **Example 2:** But now that Mr Putin himself is in the prime ministerial seat it may be harder for him to find <u>scapegoats.</u>(Nov 27, 2008)

> **Example 3:** Either way, <u>heads have begun to roll</u>. Mr Medvedev has fired four regional governors. More sackings can be expected as the economy sinks. (Feb 19, 2009)

> **Example 4:** <u>This rosy picture</u> was upset by a severe credit crunch that set in after September, as well as by the dramatic drop in oil and non-oil commodity prices that followed in the wake of the financial crisis. Foreign credit dried up quickly.(Nov 27, 2008)

The transformation of the original saying 'All is well that ends well' gives reference to the topic area of a typical Russian commodity (*oil*) in the international market. Though 'the rosy picture' means 'analytics' (a neutral business term), contextually it denotes a typified Russian business sphere – the oil market, as well as a negative evaluation of the analytical data (*credit crunch, the dramatic drop in oil prices in the wake of the financial crisis*). The other two units, 'scapegoats' and 'heads have begun to roll', repeatedly relate to people in the situation of power and authority.

Borrowing (2.2.2). National specificity in business is often represented through lexical borrowings – loan translated vocabulary units, or calques. The Russian language is not an exception. Though the loan words in English-speaking media mainly focus on power play, namely, governmental involvement into business (*kompromat, siloviki, FSB*) rather than on cultural ideas of work ethics (for example, Japanese *kaizen*), or team-work. Another reference for this linguistic source of stereotyping is allusions to the communist history of Russia (*the USSR, Soviet, the KGB*).

Syntax (2.3)

Emphatic word-order (2.3.1). Syntactic stereotyped means are rare and include emphatic word order to attract the readers' attention to the image created in the article.

>   **Example 1:** Modernization is the thing Russian business needs. (Mar 11, 2010)

Figurative means (2.4) represent a significant linguistic source of national stereotypes.

Simile and metaphor (2.4.1)

>   **Example 1:** To contain social discontent, the Kremlin puts heavy pressure on regional governments and firms not to lay off people or close plants, even if they are <u>dinosaurs</u>. A vast partly state-owned Chelyabinsk tractor plant, which narrowly avoided bankruptcy in 1998 and is run by its former Communist boss, <u>looks like the site of an industrial horror film</u>. It has 20,000 workers and few orders. Outside an idle workshop, against a backdrop of rusty pipes, several elderly women are taking part in a government-funded public-works scheme. They are painting the crumbling kerbs with silver paint. (Jun 4, 2009)

>   **Example 2:** Russia's <u>wounded giant</u>. The world's biggest gas-producer is ailing. It should be broken up. (Mar 21, 2013)

Very much like phraseology, figurative speech elements present numerous examples of stereotyping. Extended metaphors, supported by similes, produce a detailed and negatively colored representation of a Russian industrial landscape. Conversely, a conventional figure of speech in business is 'competition with runners'; however, most of contextual meanings imply that Russian businesses lose in competition.

Epithet (2.4.2). Partially the role of epithets and attribute constructions have been discussed in 2.1.2. Let us emphasize that epithets and attributes are often words with affixation, or compound words. When used in combination with other evaluative lexical means, they produced an enhanced effect on a reader.

>   **Example 1:** The <u>tragicomic</u> destruction of Yukos, and its legacy (Jun 20, 2009)

Discussion and conclusion

Next, we will summarize the types of topic-related and linguistics stereotypic means of representation of Russian business in "The Economist" (Tables 1 and 2). First, we observe that the focus of Table 1 is the representation of people in all three areas – government, business, and Russian realia. Unsurprisingly, negative stereotypes prevail (Puffer, McCarthy 2001; Rawlinson 1998). This can be explained both by media presuppositions and the state of Russian economic development in comparison with economically developed English-speaking countries. Table 2 shows that figurative means are the basic sources for stereotypes, with an emphasis on similes and metaphors of people. It should be stressed that reference sources for figurative and morphologic means are business-related. Positive stereotypes (Russian economic modernization) are rare and expressed through syntax, which obviously requires more cognitive processing time for writing journalists than the use of readily available emotional clichés.

Overall, linguistic stereotypical means help to construct the image of Russian business in simplified categories and underlined contrasts when stereotypical lexical units of well-being are combined with characteristics of a poorly-kept country. Thus, research results are of help in a more targeted identification of stereotyping potential of concrete linguistic means which is, in turn, of significance to enhance intercultural awareness for both media writers and readers.

Nonetheless, though we consider the grid of topic-related and linguistic stereotypes as effective for the analysis of image construction, a single source text selection makes up the limitation for the research. Overcoming this limitation through a variety of sources and comparative language data, along with the influence of political / ideological contexts, are viewed as important research topics for further exploration in language, media and cultural communication studies.

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