

# El género en el lenguaje de los refranes: la imagen típica de un hombre ruso frente a la imagen típica de una mujer rusa

Gender in the language of proverbs: image of a typical Russian man vs. an image of a typical Russian woman

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*Resumen.* El término Género hace referencia, tradicionalmente, al sexo biológico y a una serie de normas socio-culturales que se exigen de una persona en función de su sexo. Las relaciones de género se construyen en cada comunidad desde las instituciones públicas, que apoyan las diferencias entre ambos sexos. Existen una gran cantidad de estudios dentro del marco lingüístico y cultural, que se centran en los estereotipos de género y que hacen un especial hincapié en los conceptos culturales de lo “masculino” y lo “femenino”. Creemos que en cada cultura existen refranes, basados en sus propios estereotipos y sus actitudes frente a lo que es “femenino” o “masculino”. Nos interesan especialmente aquellos que reflejan las peculiaridades de la cultura y la lengua en Rusia y los rasgos que ayudan a crear el “estereotipo” representativo de los típicos hombres y mujeres de la cultura rusa.

*Palabras clave:* género, masculino, femenino, estereotipo, cultura, sociedad, lenguaje.

*Abstract.* Gender traditionally refers to the biological sex, and also to the set of social and cultural norms demanded of people, depending on their biological sex. Gender relations in any community are built through its public institutions which support sexual differences. There is a significant amount of studies within the linguistic and cultural framework, with the gender stereotypes’ specific character, and a special emphasis on the cultural concepts of “masculinity” and “femininity”. We believe that every culture has proverbs, based on national gender stereotypes and attitudes to “femininity” and “masculinity”. We are especially interested in the ones, which reflect general peculiarities of the Russian culture and language, and the features that help to shape “stereotyped” portraits of typical male and female representatives of the Russian culture.

*Keywords:* gender, femininity, masculinity, stereotype, culture, society, language.

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## 1. Introduction

Gender is traditionally defined not only as a set of specific characteristics associated with a certain biological sex, but also as a set of social and cultural norms that society requires from people to perform, depending on their biological sex. Moreover, it involves particular cultural characteristics that define social behavior of women and men, their relationships, individual, and legal status in a society.

The issues of gender identity and gendered representation, how gender is performed in men's and women's behaviour, the role of sex in the construction of coherent gender and sexuality, oppressive society's expectations towards women, male domination and the inevitable dependence of women within the family upon men, conflicts that women may face in order to get their self-actualization and many others continue to be hotly discussed in the fields of feminist and queer theory, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, law, and medicine (Amoros, 2007; Butler, 2004, 2006; Firestone, 1970; Friedan, 1963; Millett, 1970; Valcarcel, 2009; etc.).

Modern researchers explicate the following characteristics of gender: dynamic nature, cultural reliance, and ritual and institutional subordinacy. The fact is that gender relations are differently manifested not only in various cultural and language communities, but also at different historical stages of their development. Gender relations in any community are built through its institutions: family, school, college, government and religious institutions, the media, etc. These public institutions support sexual differences, give them the status of the norm and interpret them as natural. Public rituals also create particular gender asymmetry – in clothes, behavior, speech, branding, etc. The cultural and social nature of gender gives grounds to assert that no biological gender, but socio-cultural norms ultimately determine men's and women's psychological qualities, behavior, activities, career, etc. Being a man or a woman is not just to have particular anatomical features but to perform certain prescribed functions and roles.

There is a significant amount of studies within the linguistic and cultural framework, with the gender stereotypes' specific character and their functions as target of research, and special emphasis on the cultural concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity", gender metaphor, gender-specific linguistic world image, etc. Most of them are comparative studies of data from different languages with gender stereotypes treated as special forms of knowledge storage or behavior-orienting concepts, culturally and socially constructed presuppositions about the qualities, attributes and behavior of both sexes and their reflection in a language. Folklore is of great importance in inferring such culture-based attitudes and presuppositions. Moreover, a great deal of cultural images and aspects are intensely mirrored in such folklore genre as proverbs, which play an active social role in the life any cultural group and act as carriers of specific ethno-cultural gender stereotypes fixed in the minds of particular culture representatives.

We definitely agree with Mieder that *a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed,*

*and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation* (Mieder, 1993, p. 5).

In our research we would like to emphasize their efficiency to form specific stereotyped opinion with certain cognitive-pragmatic essence of moralizing character. Performing the function of the so-called symbolic model of the world, proverbs form a stable representation of national culture, and express stereotype interpretation of ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic images. But the concepts of “femininity” and “masculinity” vary in different cultures.

We believe that every culture has proverbs, based on national gender stereotypes and attitudes to “femininity” and “masculinity”. We are especially interested in the ones, which reflect general peculiarities of the Russian culture and language. And the main question of our research is: what are the features that help to shape “stereotyped” portraits of typical male and female representatives of the Russian culture? With this purpose we need to collect and analyze Russian proverbs with the national “male” and “female” world view, subdivide them into semantic groups and identify typical Russian “male” and “female” gender stereotypes manifested in them.

## **2. Gender stereotypes in russian folklore studies: russian “femininity” and “masculinity”**

Gender stereotypes are beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and femininity; they consist of beliefs about the typical traits and characteristics of men or women. A Russian scientist Z. Manzullina believes, that stereotypes are the standards of the typical male and female behavior, which they have to follow and which help to shape particular culture-relevant moral standards and attitudes (Manzullina, 2005). From the perspective of linguistic approach, another Russian scientist M. Garanovich considers stereotypes of masculinity / femininity to contain special biased presentation of men’s and women’s social and psychological behavior patterns and characteristics, which are reflected in the language and linguistic consciousness (Garanovich, 2011).

Modern Russian society is characterized with gradual “alignment” of gender stereotypes: the differences between “typical female” and “typical male” activities are being leveled out, there has been a great change in the concepts of “femininity” and “masculinity” – most male personality characteristics (*e.g.* ambition, dominance, aggressiveness, logical thinking, etc.) have become inherent to women. But still the identity of a “typical female” is exposed to the most rigid stereotypization, which definitely comes from the patriarchal structure of the culture.

Studying gender stereotypes in pre-school literature, a group of Russian researchers (E. Zdravomyslova, E. Gerasimov and N. Trojan) attempted to correlate the functions and the sex of the characters of Russian fairy tales. As a result, they were able to identify three main gender stereotypes: traditional (patriarchal or traditional Russian), combined (typical of the Sovietperiod) and egalitarian (in modern children’s literature).

In the course of the research of Russian folk tales' peculiarities, they noted that the underlying patriarchal stereotype is reflected in the fairy-tale canons: the heroine is the victim and the hero is a "bogatyр" (epic warrior) (Zdravomyslova, Gerasimov, Trojan, 1995). That is, according to the canons, the stereotype of "femininity" suggests certain positive personal characteristics (patience, humility, compassion, gentleness, sacrifice, etc.) and negative personal characteristics (vindictiveness, envy, laziness, capriciousness, falsity, etc.). In Russian fairy tales gender oppositions of "molodets" (a good fellow) / "tsarevna" (a princess) and "molodets" (a good fellow) / "bogatyрsha" (female bogatyр) patriarchal stereotype is "washed out" and becomes less rigid and define. Male-characters reveal "female" qualities. Female-characters, on the contrary, master the attributes and the functions assigned to men (such as wits, cunning, physical strength, etc.). Moreover, if the patriarchal tales clearly demonstrate apparent condemnation of female domination, fairy tales with a female "bogatyрsha" as the protagonist "approve" of the matriarchal stereotype: a woman is the head of the family, she is a positive character, her dominance is not condemned.

The study of the phenomena of "masculinity" and "femininity" from linguo-cultural positions gives the possibility to identify them as concepts. A number of research-works of Russian linguists were dedicated to the study of the concepts of "male", "female", "masculinity", "feminist" (Kirilina, 2004; Cartushina, 2003; Zykov, 1993; Sharov, 2012; etc.). Thus, E. Cartushina compared explication methods of the concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" in phraseology of mass communication in the Russian and English languages, and found out obvious differences in the degree of axiologiness of their constituents, that prove certain specificity from the point of view of cultural and mental ideas that form the concepts (Cartushina, 2003). She thinks that, although in both linguistic cultures the image of a male is associated with power, influence, authoritative position in the family; it is often subjected to ironic reinterpretation in the modern Russian language. Thus, the image of a female in the Russian culture is associated with such idioethnic qualities as delicacy, sophistication and sublime manners.

A famous Russian linguist A. Kirilina comes to the conclusion that Russian proverbs predominantly reflect man's power and "male" worldview (Kirilina, 2004). A "typical female" is not a human being of "full value" and a productive member of society; she is just a minor part of it. But at the same time, A. Kirilina reveals a very interesting feature of Russian proverbs – some of them represent a sort of "women's inner self". This "women's inner self" expresses strong anti-adrenocentric feature of the Russian language – it accumulates life observation on behalf of a woman. It is quite obvious in such Russian proverbs as *Моя коса – хочусовью, хочураспушу* (*Eng.* The plait is mine – I can do or undo it whenever I want); *Хоть плох муженек, а завалюсь занего – небоюсь никого* (*Eng.* Although my hubby is poor, I can hide behind him and fear no one); etc. All in all, Russian paramiology contains a very negative attitude to women's speaking in general, thus the words "woman" / "baba" and "speak" are hardly ever met in the same syntagmatic level. The verbs that can be often used instead are "брехать" (*Eng.* to talk nonsense, to tell tales), "врать" (*Eng.* to tell lies), "сплетничать" (*Eng.* to gossip), etc. The grammatical structure of the Russian

language includes a significant number of indefinite-personal and impersonal constructions, which allow the proverbs to be attributed to any person, irrespective of gender.

### 3. Methodology

Our choice of research methods and techniques depended greatly on the questions we were supposed to solve. As our aim was to construct certain stereotyped portraits of a “typical Russian female” and a “typical Russian male” represented in gender-related Russian proverbs, the principles of selection and classification of the material were based on the idea that every example had to be gender-related, i.e. relevant to the social aspects of the interaction between men and women.

The data of our study were taken from a number of sources: Russian phraseological dictionaries and dictionaries of proverbs, Internet resources of Russian folklore and proverb collections such as “Proverbs of the Russian people” (Dahl, 2008), “Proverbs, sayings, riddles” (Martynova, Mitrofanova, 1986), “Winged words” (Ashukina, Ashukina, 1988), “Dictionary of Russian phraseology” (Yarancev, 1981), etc. The choice of the mentioned above dictionaries and proverb collections is non-random, since these lexicographical works can be considered as the “mirror” of Russian cultural stereotypes. Besides, they provided two different types of data – reflecting the old-fashioned peasant view of the world (as the most numerous social group in Russia before the 20-th century) and a more modern one, reflecting current trends and tendencies in the society.

So, all the proverbs about a female/ females and a male / males were taken as samples for the current research. The proverbs with the pronouns “she” / “her” and “he” / “his” as a reference to a female / a male were also included. Thus, in total the sample for the current research consisted of about 500 Russian proverbs.

Therefore, the specific semantic areas in the selected data were outlined at the high level of generalization: the “male worldview” and the “female worldview”. Within each of these areas different semantic groups were found and analyzed with the focus on the gender differentiation as the dominant feature.

For the semantic area “female worldview” we distinguished the following groups of gender-related proverbs: “marriage” (including a number of smaller sub-groups, such as “everyday life”, “economic activities”, “interdependence”, “husband’s authority”, “domestic violence”, “good and bad wives”, etc.), “relationships”, “motherhood”, “child bearing and child rearing”, “love and affection”, “typical activities and sense of self” and “manifestation of own will”. For the semantic area “male worldview” we distinguished the following groups of gender-related proverbs: “family”; “abilities”; “work”; “attitude towards money”; “health and drinking alcohol”. Such subdivision enabled us to interpret the semantic groups, typical for the “male worldview” and the “female worldview”, and distinguish stereotyped features of a “typical Russian female” and a “typical Russian male”.

#### 4. Gender stereotypes in russian proverbs

Among all the folklore genres proverbs definitely provide unique folk wisdom and a certain cultural standard of life perception. They reflect cultural norms, beliefs and values of the society they come from. And no denying, they reflect particular gender stereotypes of it, either up-to-date or traditional.

In continuation of the research made by A. Kirilina, we subdivided the data into two major areas: Russian proverbs with the “male worldview” and proverbs with the “female worldview” (Kirilina, 2004). That way we were able to identify certain semantic groups, specific for the “male worldview” and the “female worldview”. Thus, “female” proverbs were categorized into such groups as: “marriage”; “family relations”; “motherhood”, “childbearing and childrearing”; “love and affection”; “typical activities and self-awareness”; “manifestation of own will”; “irrationality in actions and behavior”. “Male” proverbs were categorized into: “family”; “abilities”; “work”; “attitude towards money”; “health and drinking alcohol”.

As for the “female worldview”, we can emphasize the dominant role of the symbolic dependence on “the will of fate” within the semantic groups of “marriage”, “relationships”, “motherhood”, “childbearing and childrearing”, “love and affection”, “typical activities and sense of self” and “manifestation of own will” **a woman cannot change anything**, she is defenseless to everything that was destined to her. This is especially notice able within the group by “marriage”. Russian proverbs of this group clearly separate the woman’s life into two major periods – maidenhood and married life; they reflect the importance of her **obedience** and **humility** to all the hardships and troubles of life, and the necessity to keep peace and prosperity of the family. A wedding and marriage are the most important metamorphosis of a woman’s life, connected not only with the change of her status, but with significant changes in lifestyle, separation from her father’s house and parents, the emergence of new responsibilities. Therefore, this semantic group contains a lot of proverbs with a negative connotation or with moralistic and instructing ideas.

Within the semantic group “Love and affection”, we can see the dominant idea of the **impossibility for a woman to achieve happiness without a man** (her honeysweet – *Rus.* милый), and she must be ready for any self-sacrifice. In the proverbs of the semantic group “family relationships” women appear in various roles – mother, mother-in-law, sister, god-mother, daughter, sister-in-law, etc. What is more, the image of the Mother in Russian proverbs is always associated with the positive assessment: it is symbolically equivalent to the **wisdom, goodness, warmth** and **sun**, and is opposed to all the other social roles of a woman in the family. Foreexample, Жена для совета, теща для приветов, а нет милей родной матери (*Eng.* A wife is to give advice; a mother-in-law is to be welcoming; but there is nobody as adorable as the mother). There is a strict opposition for the words матушка (*Eng.* mummy) and баба (*Eng.* peasants wife, baba) in Russian proverbs, because “baba” implies **stupidity** and **narrow-mindedness** (*e.g.* Волосдолог, аумкороток – *Eng.* Long-hair and shortwit); **giddiness** (*e.g.* С бабой не говоришь – *Eng.* It is impossible to come to an agreement with a baba), **talkativeness** (*e.g.* Языком метет, что коклюшками – *Eng.* She wags her tongue like lace bobbins), **irrationality** in what she says and does (*e.g.* Меж

бабьимДАиНЕТнепроденешьиголки – *Eng.* There is little difference between women's YES and NO), **deceitfulness** (*e.g.* Бабьявраньяинасвиньеенеобъедешь – *Eng.* You cannot go round women's lies even on the back of a pig) and even **cunning** (*e.g.* Женаублажает, лихозамышляет – *Eng.* If a wife is trying to appease you, she is planning something bad). And if there is a possibility for a woman to possess some “female intellect”, it is referred to not as positive but negative characteristics of her (*e.g.* Умнуювзять – не даст слова сказать – *Eng.* If you marry a clever woman, she won't let you to say anything). Not only intellectual abilities but even beauty is considered to be of secondary importance as opposed to the necessity of **good health** (*e.g.* Больнаженамужунемила – *Eng.* An unhealthy wife is not lovable by her husband; *Начто корова – былабыженаздоровая* – *Eng.* You don't need a cow if your wife is healthy), **domesticity** and **a capacity for work** (*e.g.* Нетахозяйка, котораяговорит, ата, котораящиварит – *Eng.* A good hostess is not the one who speaks but the one who cooks tasty soup; *Ненаряджену красит – домостройство* – *Eng.* It is not the dress that makes a wife beautiful but her domesticity). There is even a group of Russian proverbs that provide tips of advice in the choice of a “good” wife. In case of the correct choice, a man can find happiness and peaceful life (*e.g.* Сдобройженойгоре – полгоря, арадостьвдвойне – *Eng.* A goodwife can half any sorrow and double any joy). The utilitarian approach of Russian proverbs is reflected in the care of the wife's health as a **valuable employee**: a wife must be **physically fit** and **healthy**, first of all.

We would like to consider a contrast between two traditional Russian folklore gender images – a “baba” (woman) and a “muzhik” (man). The notion of “muzhik” (man) is extensional and consists of several components. First of all, it is a universal form of address in the masculine communication. The notion of “muzhik” correlates with the characteristics of ethnicity and is a significant mark of “being Russian”. So the word-collocation “a Russian muzhik” is tautological. Mutual determination of these concepts and their interdependence are the most important aspects that help to understand of this image. As V. Dahl notes, the origin of the word “muzhik” comes from the word “muzh” (husband) and designates a mature middle-aged man male [118:356-357]. This notion appears to be a status feature with the dominance of health over attraction (*e.g.* Мужичокнеказист, давплекахарчист – *Eng.* Though the man is unattractive but broad-shouldered). A really healthy man was often compared to a bull (*e.g.* as healthy as an ox, as healthy as a hog, etc.) or even a bear.

As we have already mentioned, Russian proverbs, specific for the “male worldview”, may be categorized into such semantic groups like: “family”; “abilities”; “work”; “attitude towards money”; “health and drinking alcohol”. Russian proverbs of the semantic group “family” reflect such stereotypes as: “**a man is the head of the family**” (*e.g.* Замужнинойспин ойкакзакаменнойстеной – *Eng.* A husband's back is like a stone wall) and “**a man should get on well together with his woman**” (*e.g.* Мужкрепкопозжене, ажена – помужу – *Eng.* The husband is strong of his wife, and the wife – of her husband). The proverbs of semantic groups “abilities” and “work” reflect such gender stereotypes as the “**a Russian man is good at work**” (*e.g.* Муж – домостроитель, нищетеотгонитель – *Eng.* A husband can build a house and send away poverty); “**a Russian man is cunning and shrewd**” (*e.g.* Мужикглуп, каксвинья, ахитёр, какчерт – *Eng.* Though a man is not very clever, he is as cunning as

the devil); **“a Russian man is often stupid”** (e.g. *Искал мужик нож, а нашележа* – Eng. A man was looking for a knife but found a hedgehog); **“a Russian man does everything at random”** (e.g. *Наавось мужик хлеб сеет* – Eng. A man sows at random even wheat). Russian proverbs of the semantic group “attitude towards money” reflect two contrasting age-dependent stereotypes: **“a Russian man (husband/father) is thrifty”** (e.g. *Сыта свинья, а всё жрёт; богат мужик, а всё копит* – Eng. Though the pig is not hungry but it keeps eating, though the man is rich but he keeps saving money); **“a Russian man (son) is wasteful”** (e.g. *Отец накопил, а сын раструсил* – Eng. What the father had saved up, the son wasted). As for the proverbs of the semantic group “health and drinking alcohol”, we can note that they reflect such gender stereotypes as: **“a Russian man is healthy and strong”** (e.g. *Неказистлицом, да тряхнет молодцом* – Eng. Though he is not very handsome but very strong); **“a Russian man likes alcoholic drinks”** (e.g. *Где кабачок, там и мужичок* – Eng. A man is always close to the pub).

In addition to the “pure” semantic groups, specific for the “male worldview” and the “female worldview”, there are some examples of the dual nature of “male-female worldview”. Moreover, this model can be updated either through the polar opposition of the “male” to “female” (e.g. *Мужик тянет в одну сторону, баба в другую* – Eng. A man pulls to one side, a woman – to the other); or through the unification of the two interdependent components into the integral whole (e.g. *Муж и жена – одна сатана* – Eng. Husband and wife are indeed of the same breed).

## 5. Conclusión

Gender is part of both the collective and individual consciousness. Thus, it must be studied as a cognitive phenomenon, which is manifested in stereotypes, fixed in the language and verbal behavior of individuals, conscious of being male or female, on the one hand, and experiencing some pressure from particular language structures reflecting the collective vision of the gender, on the other.

We consider the study of femininity and masculinity as cultural concepts to be one of the most promising areas of gender studies, as its results enhance the validity and explanatory power of the other linguistic-related areas. There is no doubt, that femininity and masculinity reveal both universal and specific aspects. As a result – the identification of such specific and general features becomes one of the most important goals of gender studies.

Femininity and masculinity as cultural concepts exist within historical, actual and figurative dimensions, and each of them pertains to linguistic description, which allows identifying the cultural representation of gender in a language, distinguishing gender stereotypes and retracing them diachronically.

Cultural representation of gender is exposed to the manipulation through emphasizing of certain gender stereotypes. The study of masculinity and femininity as cultural concepts should be conducted within multiple cultural codes, including the analysis and description of how the total gender stereotype inventory of a language depends on the



historical period or the social environment. For the more precise description of characteristics of femininity and masculinity, and men's and women's verbal behavior it is necessary to analyze the features of a language taken as a whole. The interpretation of these concepts in different languages may vary. Therefore, it is possible to talk about the discrepancy between stereotypes of femininity and masculinity in different cultural environments.

As for the Russian language, we can conclude that Russian proverbs represent a "typical" Russian female as defenseless, obedient and humble creature who cannot change anything in her life and cannot achieve happiness without a man. She is stupid, narrow-minded, giddy, talkative and deceitful; but she is a valuable employee and possesses good health, domesticity and a capacity for work. The only positive female image in Russian proverbs is the image of the Mother which is equivalent to the wisdom, goodness, warmth and sun, and is opposed to all the other social roles of a woman in the family.

Russian proverbs represent a "typical" Russian male as the healthy and stronghead of the family, who needs to get on well with his wife, is good at work, but does everything at random. He is thrifty, cunning and shrewd, but sometimes may be stupid and wasteful, and likes alcoholic drinks.

As stereotypes are the standards of men's and women's behaviour, which comprise certain moral relationship, typical of a particular culture, we can conclude that "a typical Russian female" suffers severe and rigid gender stereotypization in Russian which predominantly reflect the "male worldview".

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