

Vietnamese-Russian Mutual and Self-Perceptions: Results of an Intercultural Research

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Abstract

The article sums up the major outcome of a research aiming to draw the national / ethnic portraits and self-portraits of the Russian and the Vietnamese nations. Vietnamese-Russian mutual and self-perceptions were investigated in the frame of a questionnaire-based research conducted with Russian and Vietnamese university students (N=100 in each country) which was complemented by a corpus linguistic analysis. Data were collected in two categories: characteristic as well as personified (anthroponymic) traits; whereas firstly lexical units descriptive of the Vietnamese and the Russian people were gathered, secondly names of well-known personalities of the two nations were called for. Results shed light on differences as well as similarities between how members of both nations see themselves vis-à-vis how member of the other nation see them. Semantic asymmetries were pinpointed in the case of overlapping descriptions of national characteristics. Negative (critical) traits of mutual and self-perceptions were pinpointed. Results of the research may effectively contribute to the better understanding of Russian-Vietnamese intercultural communication and can hopefully be conducive to prevent intercultural misunderstandings and miscommunication in this relation.

Keywords: characteristic and anthroponymic traits, intercultural communication, mutual and self-perceptions, Psycholinguistics.

Introduction

The investigation of intercultural communication is more timely and relevant than ever. Intercultural dialogue can be conceptualized in numerous ways and can be scrutinized with different research methods in order to better understand how actors conduct this dialogue, to be able to predict their future behavior as well as to effectively prevent intercultural misunderstandings and miscommunication. In this article, the authors analyze Russian and Vietnamese culture-bearers' mutual and self-perceptions relying on the concepts and results of the Russian School of Psycholinguistics [Sorokin 2007; Ufimtseva 2014; Leonard et al. 2019].

Since the 1960s, intercultural studies have been attempting to gain an insight to intercultural communication by the application of different approaches including value theories [Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Schwartz 1992], as well as measurable cultural dimensions [Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1999], followed by theories originating from intercultural psychology [Triandis et al. 1971; Berry 1980; Li et al. 2019] to mention but a few conceptual frameworks. In this study, the authors focus on the concepts of national / ethnic portraits and self-portraits [Sorokin 2007; Markovina et al. 2021] that root from the Russian School of Psycholinguistics. Sorokin (2007) reconstructed ethnic portraits and self-portraits through the identification of characterological and personified (anthroponymic) traits. This study aims to better understand and explain Russian-Vietnamese mutual and self-perceptions with the purpose of raising the effectiveness of bilateral

communication, to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and miscommunication.

Methods

Primary data collection was performed in the form of a questionnaire-based survey conducted with Russian and Vietnamese university students (100–100 respondents in each country) and complemented by a corpus linguistic analysis with the online research tool Sketch Engine [Kilgarriff et al. 2014].

Questionnaires were created firstly in the Russian language followed by their Vietnamese translation and were distributed online via Google Forms platform. Respondents were homogeneous in both countries in terms of age (17–25 years), social status (university students), and mother tongue (the Russian or the Vietnamese language, respectively). Data was collected in Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University (Moscow, Russia) and in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Vietnam National University (Hanoi, Vietnam). Participation was voluntary, questionnaires were approved by the Ethical Committee of Leontiev Center for Cross-Cultural Research (Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Science). A total number of 109 Russian and 112 Vietnamese respondents filled out the questionnaires, out of which 100–100 were randomly selected for analysis. The questionnaires consisted of two major parts, the first one requesting description of the Russian and the Vietnamese people, the second one collecting names of famous or well-known personalities from each nation. Results were arranged into frequency lists by native Russian- and Vietnamese-speakers in order to draw the ethnic/national portraits and self-portraits of the two nations.

Primary analysis was complemented by a secondary investigation with corpus linguistic methods. Two large-scale

linguistic corpora were selected for data analysis: the Russian language was investigated by *ruTenTen11*, an Internet-based corpus of the Russian-language from 2011 consisting of approximately 18 billion words; while Vietnamese was analyzed by *VietnameseWaC*, a similar Internet-based corpus from 2010, a corpus comprising approximately 106 million words. Both online corpora were searched for keywords and analyzed with the Sketch Engine corpus linguistic tool for thesauri, frequencies, keyword in context, and investigation of semantic fields.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the questionnaire-based survey, both characteristic traits (descriptive nouns and adjectives) and personified (anthroponymic) traits (names of well-known personalities) were collected from the respondents from four directions: 1. Russian self-portraits; 2. Russians' portrait (perception) about Vietnamese; 3. Vietnamese self-portraits; 4. Vietnamese's portrait (perception) about Russians. A total number of 675 characteristic traits were gathered from the Russian respondent group (437 traits of Russian and 238 of Vietnamese people), meanwhile 579 characteristic traits from the Vietnamese participants (308 characteristics of Vietnamese people and 271 traits of Russians).

Chart 1 displays the top-3 characteristic traits of the Russian and the Vietnamese self-portraits, divided into two semantically different groups by the authors, namely into characteristics with positive vs. negative (critical) meaning. The top-3 results suggest a different self-perception of the two nations, Russians describing themselves as *kind*, *patient*, and *courageous*, while Vietnamese mainly see themselves as *united*, *hard-working*, and *patriotic*. Russian characteristic traits seem to be more closely connected to personal good qualities, to benevolence, solidarity

Chart 1

Top-3 positive and negative (critical) characteristic traits of the two nations

	Russian self-portrait		Vietnamese self-portrait	
	Positive traits	Negative traits	Positive traits	Negative traits
1	<i>kindness</i> (доброта)	<i>passivity</i> (пассивность)	<i>unity</i> (đoàn kết)	<i>being indomitable</i> (bất khuất)
2	<i>patience</i> (терпеливость)	<i>sadness</i> (грусть)	<i>hard work</i> (cần cù)	<i>naivety</i> (chất phác)
3	<i>courage</i> (смелость)	<i>heavy drinking</i> (пьянство)	<i>patriotism</i> (yêu nước)	—

Chart 2

Overlapping characteristic traits of Russians and Vietnamese

Russian original	Vietnamese original	English equivalent
<i>смелость</i>	<i>dũng cảm</i>	<i>courage</i>
<i>гостеприимство</i>	<i>hiếu khách</i>	<i>hospitality</i>
<i>трудолюбие</i>	<i>cần cù</i>	<i>hard work</i>
<i>ум</i>	<i>thông minh</i>	<i>intelligence</i>
<i>доброта</i>	<i>tốt bụng</i>	<i>kindness</i>

and compassion to their fellow countrymen, while a stronger reference to the country/nation can be grasped in the Vietnamese dataset marked by words as *đoàn kết* (*unity*) or *yêu nước* (*patriotism*). Respondents described both Russians and Vietnamese by an overwhelmingly high proportion of positive nouns and adjectives, however, some sporadic examples of negative (critical)

traits were also mentioned. Russians criticize themselves with *passivity* (*пассивность*), *sadness* (*грусть*), and *heavy drinking* (*пьянство*), while Vietnamese self-perception includes being *indomitable* (*bất khuất*) and *naïve* (*chất phác*).

The collected characteristic traits displayed several overlapping items that were evoked by both Vietnamese and Russian respondents (Chart 2). After compiling all the obtained data in all four investigated directions (Russian and Vietnamese self-descriptions and mutual descriptions of the two nations), the following five overlapping characteristics emerged from the survey: 1. *courage* (*смелость/dũng cảm*); 2. *hospitality* (*гостеприимство/hiếu khách*); 3. *hard work* (*трудолюбие/cần cù*); 4. *intelligence* (*ум/thông minh*); and 5. *kindness* (*доброта/tốt bụng*). It must be noted that although these traits can be considered as linguistic (translational) equivalents, their semantic structure may vary in the Russian and the Vietnamese languages (for a more detailed description of the common traits see [Markovina et al. 2022]).

Although the aforementioned five pairs of overlapping characteristics — five Russian and five Vietnamese words — can be considered as dictionary-equivalents, their semantic structure were contrasted with the aim of gaining a more precise picture of the culturally different denotations and connotations of the words *смелость* and *dũng cảm* (*courage*); *гостеприимство* and *hiếu khách* (*hospitality*); *трудолюбие* and *cần cù* (*hard work*); *ум* and *thông minh* (*intelligence*); as well as *доброта* and *tốt bụng* (*kindness*). The authors chose corpus linguistic methods to semantically compare these pairs of words, with the aid of the thesauri function of the Sketch Engine online analytical tool [Kilgarriff 2014]. The thesauri function identifies quasi-synonymic expressions in the selected language (Russian and Vietnamese) based on context of these words within the massive amount of texts in the compared reference corpora (*ruTenTen11* and *VietnameseWaC*).

Chart 3

**Semantic comparison of an overlapping trait:
hard work (трудолюбие/cần cù)**

	Russians		Vietnamese	
	Value	Freq.	Value	Freq.
1. <i>целестремленность</i> (<i>purposefulness</i>)	0.495	2864	<i>chăm chỉ</i> (hard work, assiduousness)	0.41 1237
2. <i>настойчивость</i> (<i>persistence</i>)	0.486	5401	<i>cực khổ</i> (being miserable)	0.21 684
3. <i>порядочность</i> (<i>moral rectitude</i>)	0.462	3443	<i>giỏi giang</i> (proficiency)	0.2 332
4. <i>доброжелательность</i> (<i>benevolence</i>)	0.448	2960	<i>cực nhọc</i> (difficulty)	0.19 558
5. <i>аккуратность</i> (<i>tidiness</i>)	0.44	3454	<i>cần mẫn</i> (industriousness)	0.19 469
6. <i>честность</i> (<i>honesty</i>)	0.426	8625	<i>năng động</i> (dynamism)	0.16 2503
7. <i>упорство</i> (<i>perseverance</i>)	0.415	6434	<i>tắc trách</i> (negligence)	0.16 146
8. <i>дисциплинированность</i> (<i>discipline</i>)	0.402	1008	<i>hiếu khách</i> (hospitality)	0.16 331
9. <i>смелость</i> (<i>courage</i>)	0.401	10108	<i>chịu khó</i> (hard work)	0.15 1707
10. <i>внимательность</i> (<i>attentiveness</i>)	0.393	3235	<i>nặng nhọc</i> (being heavy, hard work)	0.15 521

In this paper — due to limitations in length — only one pair of words: *трудолюбие* and *cần cù* (*hard work*) are being compared (Chart 3). As displayed on Chart 3, strongly different thesauri / synonyms were identified in the two cases. The Russian word *трудолюбие* is mainly associated with the qualities of a noble, benevolent, sincere person appearing in such expressions as *порядочность* (*moral rectitude*), *доброжелательность* (*benevolence*), *аккуратность* (*tidiness*), *честность* (*honesty*) and *внимательность* (*attentiveness*). Thesauri of the Vietnamese term *cần cù* refer on the one hand to the difficulties and hardship — even misery — of Vietnamese people as connected to *hard work* taking form in such words as *cực khổ* (*being miserable*), *cực nhọc* (*difficulty*), and *nặng nhọc* (*being heavy, hard work*). On the other hand, the semantic structure of the Vietnamese word seems to refer to a more active, dynamic approach to work appearing in the expressions *giỏi giang* (*proficiency*) and *năng động* (*dynamism*).

As mentioned above, primary data collection was complemented by a subsequent corpus linguistic analysis. Based on two large linguistic corpora of the Russian and the Vietnamese languages (*ruTenTen11* and *VietnameseWaC* respectively), the contexts of the words *Russian* (*русский, Nga*) and *Vietnamese* (*вьетнамский, Việt*) were investigated in two word classes, nouns and adjectives, with the top-10 most frequent contexts as displayed in Chart 4. The core of the national self-portraits in both the Russian and the Vietnamese cases incorporate the following three notions: 1. „country” embodied in such words as *России* (*Russia*), *nước* (*country*), and *quốc* (*country*); 2. “nation/people” of the country marked by contexts as *народа* (*nation*), *человек* (*man*), *người* (*people*), and *dân* (*people*); 3. “language” appearing in words including *язык* (*language*), *tiếng* (*language*). In the Russian self-perception *history* (*истории* and *историче-*

Chart 4

**Russian and Vietnamese self-portraits,
based on a corpus linguistic comparison**

	Russian self-portrait		Vietnamese self-portrait	
	Noun	Adjective	Noun	Adjective
1	<i>Россия</i> (Russia)	<i>русский</i> (Russian)	<i>người</i> (people)	<i>Việt</i> (Vietnamese)
2	<i>язык</i> (language)	<i>новый</i> (new)	<i>dân</i> (people)	<i>trung</i> (central)
3	<i>время</i> (time)	<i>английском</i> (English)	<i>tiếng</i> (language)	<i>chính</i> (main)
4	<i>году</i> (year)	<i>российской</i> (Russian)	<i>nước</i> (country)	<i>mỹ</i> (American)
5	<i>истории</i> (history)	<i>великого</i> (great)	<i>năm</i> (year)	<i>mới</i> (new)
6	<i>народа</i> (nation)	<i>других</i> (other)	<i>quốc</i> (country)	<i>pháp</i> (French)
7	<i>жизни</i> (life)	<i>народные</i> (national)	<i>nhà</i> (house)	<i>đại</i> (great)
8	<i>человек</i> (man)	<i>православной</i> (Orthodox)	<i>việc</i> (job)	<i>bằng</i> (equal)
9	<i>культуры</i> (culture)	<i>разных</i> (various)	<i>đất</i> (soil)	<i>lớn</i> (great)
10	<i>место</i> (place)	<i>исторической</i> (historical)	<i>phương</i> (way)	<i>ngôn</i> (language)

ской), *culture* (культуры), and the *Orthodox* (православной) Christian religion appear in the top-10 results, meanwhile *house* (nhà), *job* (việc) and *soil* (đất) take central place in the Vietnamese self-portrait.

Chart 5

Russian and Vietnamese anthroponymic self-portrait (top-3 groups with examples)

Category	Examples	Share
Writers	<i>Pushkin (39); Tolstoy (14); Dostoevsky (11)</i>	29.91%
Political leaders	<i>Peter the Great (29); Putin (14); Lenin (7)</i>	23.17%
Scientists	<i>Mendeleev (20); Lomonosov (16); Sechenov (11)</i>	19.65%
Political leaders	<i>Ho Chi Minh (98); Quang Trung (16); Nguyen Xuan Phuc (12)</i>	51.93%
Military leaders	<i>Vo Nguyen Giap (81); Vo Thi Sau (13); Le Loi (3)</i>	29.08%
Writers	<i>Nguyen Du (22); Nguyen Trai (19); Xuan Dieu (1); Le Quy Don (1)</i>	12.76%

Besides characteristic traits, personified (anthroponymic) portraits of Russia and Vietnam were also reconstructed by requesting respondents to evoke famous Russian and Vietnamese persons. Russians named 341 well-known Russian and 94 Vietnamese individuals, while the Vietnamese respondents gave account of 343 Vietnamese and 335 Russian persons (Chart 5). Nearly three fourths (72.73%) of the Russian anthroponymic self-portrait contain writers (*Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc.*), political leaders (*Peter the Great, Putin, Lenin, etc.*), and scientists (*Mendeleev, Lomonosov, Sechenov, etc.*) while 93.77 percent of the Vietnamese anthroponymic self-portrait is composed of political leaders (*Ho Chi Minh, Quang Trung, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, etc.*), military leaders (*Vo Nguyen Giap, Vo Thi Sau, Le Loi, etc.*), and writers (*Nguyen Du, Nguyen Trai, Xuan Dieu, and Le Quy Don*).

Conclusion

This questionnaire-based research effectively shed light not only on dissimilarities between the Russian and Vietnamese perceptions and self-perceptions but also on common / overlapping characteristic traits of the two nations including the notions of *courage, hospitality, hard work, intelligence* and *kindness*. The further investigation of these terms with the aid of corpus linguistic methods delineated semantic, culture-bound differences in the meaning of the Russian and Vietnamese expressions.

Although respondents seemed to describe both their native country and the other investigated country with an overwhelmingly high proportion of positive traits, a handful of negative or critical characteristics appeared including Russians characterized by *passivity* (*пассивность*), *sadness* (*грусть*), and *heavy drinking* (*пьянство*), or Vietnamese seeing themselves as *being indomitable* (*bất khuất*), and *naivety* (*chất phác*). The further investigation and possibly a complementary research on only negative perceptions might yield valuable additional results.

Based on the top-10 results of Russian and Vietnamese self-perceptions, the cores of the two national self-portraits were delineated, defining both self-perceptions with the notions “country”, “nation/people”, and “language”. The Russian self-portrait was found to be strongly connected to *history* (*историю/ исторической*), *culture* (*культуры*), and to the *Orthodox* (*православной*) Christian religion, while the Vietnamese results suggest a close connection with *house* (*nhà*), *job* (*việc*) and *soil* (*đất*). Some terms — e.g. *đoàn kết* (*unity*) or *yêu nước* (*patriotism*) worth to be further investigated in a subsequent study.

All in all, the investigation of mutual and self-perceptions in the Russian-Vietnamese context proved to be a fertile area of intercultural research. The results further sophisticated our knowledge on conscious and subconscious shades of meanings,

differences in self-perception compared to how others see us, and eventually without doubt can contribute to a more effective communication and the avoidance of intercultural misunderstandings between members of the observed nations.

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