Social Representations of Russian Cuisine in Multinational University Students

Alexey L. Novikov, PhD

Irina A. Novikova, PhD

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
6 Miklukho-Maklay St., Moscow, Russia, 117198

Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study on the social representations about the Russian national cuisine in the modern Russian and international students. A total of 331 respondents took part in the research, including 246 Russian students and 75 international students of various departments of a multinational university (Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, PFUR). They completed a four-part interview on the Russian cuisine. The concept of "social representation" by S.Moscovici and the structural approach by J.-C.Abric were used for data analysis. There are many similarities in the structure of social representations of Russian cuisine in Russian and the international students. The main difference is that the structure of social representations of the international students does not include the elements related to the history and traditions of Russian cuisine. Information about the traditions of Russian cuisine can be included in the program of Russian language study for help of intercultural communication and adaptation of international students.

Keywords: Russian national cuisine, national cuisine, social representations, intercultural adaptation, intercultural communication, international students, multinational university.

1. Introduction

Adaptation to the national cuisine is the main part of the intercultural adaptation. Adaptation to the change in food is considered as one of the highlights of both physiological and psychosocial adaptation to a new environment, such as life in a metropolis or abroad (Khodorovich et al, 2008).

Representations about national cuisine often are part of the ethnic stereotypes about other nations. Therefore, these representations can play an important role in intercultural adaptation and communication in new country.

National cuisine is one of the essential components of the culture of any country, it bears the imprint of the peculiarities of geographical location, historical, socio-political, religious, economic development. For example, the formation of the national Russian cuisine is associated with the traditions of the peasant cuisine of olden Russia, and the influence of the Orthodox Church with a lot of fast days. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russian cuisine was heavily influenced by European, especially French cuisine. Modern Russian cuisine took some culinary traditions and the dishes of the countries that were previously part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Emelyanova, 2013).

Russian cuisine is very diverse, as Russia is a very large and multicultural country. However, Russian cuisine has some typical dishes and features. For example, a soup as the most important attribute of a lunch; porridge of different grains, and especially of buckwheat; brown bread (rye bread); pancakes ("*blini*" in Russian) and pies ("*pirogi*" in Russian), etc (Emelyanova, 2013; Pokhlebkin, 2004). Many Russian proverbs are connected to the national cuisine, such as "Shchi and porridge are our staples" ("*Shchi da kasha pishcha nasha*" in Russian).

The central problem of our research is to identify how the Russian national cuisine is perceived by modern young people (Russian and international students of the multinational university). One of our aims is to identify and compare the social representations of the Russian national cuisine in the modern Russian and international students.

2. Methodology

We conducted a brief survey to identify the student preferences on the subject of Russian cuisine. The questionnaire includes four main questions asking respondents to name: (1) most typical dishes of Russian cuisine; (2) a few associations that come to mind at the mention of Russian cuisine; (3) a favorite dish of Russian cuisine; (4) a favorite

national cuisine.

The question regarding the associations of Russian cuisine is central to the study. The answers to it can us to reveal the structure of the social representations of Russian cuisine by using the concept of "social representation" by S. Moscovici and the structural approach by J.-C. Abric.

By S. Moscovici a social representation is a stock of values, ideas, metaphors, beliefs, and practices that are shared among the members of groups and communities. They are further referred to as "the system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history" (Moscovici, 1973; 1998).

There are four areas in the structure of social representations according to the structural approach by Jean-Claude Abric (Abric, 2001): the Core includes the most frequent and high rating associations; the Periphery One (the area of potential change) includes the most frequent, but lower rating associations; the Minority area includes the associations which have a small frequency but high rating; the Periphery Two (a real peripheral area) includes associations with low frequency and low rating. This approach is widely used by social psychologists to analyze the social representations (e.g., Bovina, 2007).

A total of 331 respondents took part in the research, including 246 Russian students (120 persons from Moscow and 126 – from 72 Russian cities) and 75 international PFUR students (from more than 20 countries, e.g., China, Mongolia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Ecuador).

3. Results

Most typical dishes of Russian cuisine. The Russian students named 94 dishes, which they think typical for Russian cuisine. They listed from 1 to 18 answers to this question.

Russian students believe that the most typical dishes of Russian cuisine are the following:
1) "Blini" (pancakes) – 76%;
2) "Shchi" (cabbage soup) – 48%;
3) "Pelmeni" (meat dumplings) – 39%;
4) "Borshch" (cabbage and beetroot soup) – 37%;
5) "Okroshka" (a cold soup made from kvas) – 35%;
6) "Kasha" (porridge) – 34%;
7) "Pirogi" (pies) and "Pirozhki" (pasties) – 31%;
8) "Kartoshka" (potatoes) – 25%;
9) "Varenyky" (potato, cottage cheese or berry dumplings) – 15%;
10) "Ukha" (fish soup) – 14 %.

This rating corresponds to the generally accepted characteristics of Russian cuisine. The respondents named soups four times among the ten most popular dishes. The famous Russian pancakes, porridge and cakes are also among the leaders. But it is interesting that caviar, vodka and bread were named by less than 10% of the respondents.

The international students believe that the most typical dishes of Russian cuisine are the following:
1) "Borshch" (cabbage and beetroot soup) – 64%;
2) "Blini" (pancakes) – 55%;
3) "Pelmeni" (meat dumplings) – 27%;
4) "Kasha" (porridge) – 21%;
5) "Shchi" (cabbage soup) – 20%;
6) "Kartoshka" (potatoes) – 20%;
7) "Okroshka" (a cold soup made from kvas) – 13%;
8) "Solyanka" (thick, piquant soup) – 11%.

This rating includes 4 different soups and pancakes. In general, we can say that the concepts of most typical Russian dishes are very similar both for the Russian and international students.

An interesting fact is that the first place in the rating given by the international students and the fourth place in the rating given by the Russian students is taken by *"Borshch"* which is one of the most famous dishes of Ukrainian cuisine. Borsch is really often cooked and eaten in Russia, so a lot of people list it among Russian dishes without any doubt. We can say that borsch is one of the most famous dishes of Slavic cuisine in general.

Favorite dishes of Russian cuisine. 86% of the Russian students named from 1 to 5 **favorite dishes** of Russian cuisine (tab. 1). 6 people say that they love all Russian dishes.

Table 1. Favorite Russian dishes

Rating of the Russian students	Rating of the international students
1. "Blini" (pancakes) – 42%	1. "Blini" (pancakes) – 36%
2. None – 24%	2. "Borshch" (cabbage and beetroot soup) – 19%
3. "Pelmeni" (meat dumplings) – 10%	3. None – 17%
4. "Borshch" (cabbage and beetroot soup)– 10%	4. "Pelmeni" (meat dumplings) – 8%
5. "Kartoshka" (potatoes) – 8%	5. "Kvas" (bread juice) – 7%
6. "Pirogi" (pies) and Pirozhki – 7%	6. "Olivje" (Russian salad) – 5%
7. "Kasha" (porridge) – 6,5%	
8. "Shchi" (cabbage soup) – 6%	
9. "Varenyky" (potato, cottage cheese or berry dumplings) – 6%	
10. All – 2,5%	

42% of the Russian students said that their favorite Russian dish is "*blini*" (thin pancakes). Many of them indicated favorite toppings for pancakes. This is caviar, sour cream ("*smetana*" in Russian), jam, etc. There is a match between the most popular and favorite dishes of Russian cuisine in this case.

83% of the international students named from 1 to 4 favorite Russian dishes. The favorite dish in most cases is pancakes as well as in Russian students. The second place goes to the borsch.

Social representations of Russian cuisine. The question regarding the associations of Russian cuisine is central to our study. The answers to this question can reveal the structure of the social representations of Russian cuisine.

Only 4 of the Russian students did not name any association with Russian cuisine. The other students listed from 1 to 9 associations. Half of the respondents named 2-3 associations. For analysis, we used associations which were named at least 5% of the respondents.

Table 2 shows that, first of all, the Russian respondents perceive Russian food as *tasty*. Then they called the favorite and most delicious Russian dishes such as *blini* and *borshch*. Russian food is also associated with the *grandmother*, *stove* and *rustic home*. This group of associations reflects the traditional nature of Russian cuisine, its origins and roots.

Table 2. Social representation structure in Russian students (n=242)

The frequency of association	The average rank of the association	
	≤ 2.12	> 2.12
	Core	**Periphery One**
≥ 19	Tasty (51; 1,86)	Nourishing (37; 2,14)
	Russian stove / oven (39; 2,08)	Bread and salt / caraway (23; 2,36)
	Blini (25; 2,12)	People in national dress / national dress (22; 2,5)
	Borsch (23; 1,65)	Holiday / merriment (21; 2,24)
	Grandmother (21; 2,00)	Vodka (20; 2,3)
	Peasant's house (19; 1,84)	Liberal-table (19; 2,26)
	Minority area	**Periphery Two**
< 19	A lot of different food (15; 1,93)	Healthy and well-balanced food (16; 2,75)
	Pelmeni (14; 2,1)	Samovar (16; 2,19)
	Wooden tableware (13; 2,08)	Pickled vegetables (15; 2,73)
	Fatty and high-calorie foods (12; 2,08)	Countryside (13; 2,46)
	Home cooking (12; 1,75)	Potatoes (11; 2,36)
	Caviar (10; 2,1)	

Note: In parentheses after each association the first is its frequency, and then the average rank.

The associations of the first peripheral area informatively complement the associations of the core area. The Russian students perceive Russian food not only as tasty, but also *nourishing*. The traditional nature of Russian food is associated with *people in national dress* and with traditional *Russian Caraway* (a big Russian pie) or *Bread and salt*. Bread and salt (or a round loaf with a small saltcellar) is at the same time a traditional attribute of Russian *holidays*, such as weddings. During the holidays there is a tradition in Russia to cover a large and *liberal-table*, which includes *vodka* among other dishes.

The minority area includes the associations reflecting the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of Russian food, such as, a lot of food, homemade food, rich and high-calorie food. These characteristics are important for people who keep to a diet and monitor the quantity and quality of food. This area also includes dumplings and caviar, which are traditional Russian dishes, but are the symbols of Russian cuisine for a smaller part of the sample compared to blini and borsch. Finally, in the area of minority there is wooden tableware, which was traditional in the Russian countryside, but is not currently used and is mostly decorative.

7 international students did not name any association with Russian cuisine. Other students listed from 1 to 9 associations. Half of the respondents named 2-3 associations.

Similar to the Russian students, the international students first of all perceived Russian food as *tasty* (tab. 3). The core area also includes the most popular Russian dishes among the international students such as *pancakes* and *borsch*.

Table 3. Social representation structure in international students (n=68)

The frequency of association	The average rank of the association	
	< 1,80	≥ 1,80
≥ 7	Core	Periphery One
	Tasty (17; 1,41)	Vodka (10; 1,88)
	Borshch (10; 1,70)	Vegetables (10; 2,30)
	Blini (7; 1,57)	Nourishing (7; 2,29)
		Potato (7; 2,29)
< 7	Minority area	Periphery Two
	Fish / fish food (6; 1,67)	Soups (5; 1,80)
	Fat food (4; 1,75)	Smetana (4; 2,00)

Note: In parentheses after each association the first is its frequency, and then the average rank.

Periphery One area includes the association of Russian food with a sense of satiety. This area also includes Russian *vodka*, as well as *vegetables* and *potatoes*, which are often a side dish or a snack to vodka.

The minority area contains such associations as *fish* and *fat food*. These associations were named by those students who try to keep to a healthy diet.

Overall, there are many similarities in the structure of the social representations of Russian cuisine in Russian and international students, which are presented in the table 4.

Table 4. Similarities in the structure of the social representations in Russian and international students

Core	Periphery One
Tasty	Nourishing
Borsch	Vodka
Blini	
Minority area	**Periphery Two**
Seafood / caviar	
Fatty food	*No Match*

The main difference is that the structure of social representations of the international students does not include the elements related to the history and traditions of Russian cuisine. In our opinion it is quite natural, since most international students are not fluent in Russian history in general, and especially in the history of Russian cuisine.

Favorite national cuisine. And finally, we present the popularity rating of national cuisines in the Russian and

international students.

14 Russian and only one international student said that they did not have a favorite cuisine.

Italian (58% of the respondents) and Japanese (46% of the respondents) foods are the most popular among the Russian students. Russian cuisine takes only the third place (only 33% of the respondents named it).

The international students primarily named the national cuisine of their own country as their favorite (71% of the respondents). Italian (37% of the respondents) and Japanese (21% of the respondents) foods take the second and third place respectively. Russian food takes the fourth place, 15% of the respondents named it.

4. Conclusions

Summing up the results of the study, it can be concluded that:

1) The most popular symbol of Russian cuisine is pancakes ("blini" in Russian), one of the most popular and favorite dishes of Russian cuisine among both Russian and international students;
2) There are many similarities in the structure of social representations of Russian cuisine in Russian and the international students who live and study in Russia. Both Russian and international students view Russian food as tasty, nourishing, and name some favorite dishes as borsch and pancakes. The main difference is that the structure of social representations of the international students does not include the elements related to the history and traditions of Russian cuisine;
3) Russian students prefer primarily Italian and Japanese cuisine, while international students prefer the cuisine of their home country.

Information about Russian cuisine, its history and traditions, can be included in the program of Russian language study. This knowledge will help intercultural communication and adaptation of the international students.

5. Ackowledgement

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