



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2020.3.10>

UDC 81'42  
LBC 81.006.3

Submitted: 30.08.2019  
Accepted: 28.02.2020

## CONSTRUCTING MODERN RUSSIAN IDENTITY THROUGH DISCOURSE METAPHORS

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**Abstract.** The current paper presents a comprehensive literature review of research into the phenomenon of Russian national identity and emphasizes the crucial role of discourse metaphor in narratives of national culture and identity. The latter, as a complex mental construct, encompasses common or similar beliefs or opinions internalized in the course of socialization as well as emotional attitudes, behavioural and linguistic dispositions. The paper claims that Russian patriotism-based national identity construction is directly related to the historical background, current political ideology, as well as objectives and tasks the state sets. Patriotic sentiments in Russia tend to boost due to some life-changing dramatic events or challenges the country has to face; this gives rise to employing a multitude of discursive practices, which rely heavily on discourse metaphors. The relevant point the paper proposes lies in the fact that discourse metaphors, being conceptually grounded, serve as a pervasive cognitive mechanism applied to explain a complex abstract concept of national identity. However, its meaning is still being shaped in relation to a particular period of time and the context where a debate is unfolding. Unlike conceptual metaphors that are considered to be universal, independent of time, discourse metaphors change or evolve within the ongoing discourse and are intended for specific purposes. The current paper seeks to demonstrate how particular metaphors can serve as discursive mechanisms of constructing the national identity to achieve both culturally and historically specific strategic purposes. The authors claim that a combination of co-occurring metaphors in the public discourse forms a holistic extended metaphorical narrative promoting a particular view of Russianness and focus on some of them.

**Key words:** national identity, conceptual metaphor, cognitive mechanism, discourse metaphor, metaphorical narrative, Russianness.

**Citation.** Skrynnikova I.V., Astafurova T.N. Constructing Modern Russian Identity Through Discourse Metaphors. *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 2. Yazykoznanie* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University. Linguistics], 2020, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 107-115. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2020.3.10>

УДК 81'42  
ББК 81.006.3

Дата поступления статьи: 30.08.2019  
Дата принятия статьи: 28.02.2020

## КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЕ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ РОССИЙСКОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ ДИСКУРСИВНЫМИ МЕТАФОРАМИ

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**Аннотация.** В статье представлен подробный литературный обзор исследований феномена российской идентичности и подчеркивается решающая роль дискурсивной метафоры в нарративах национальной культуры и идентичности. Последняя как сложный ментальный конструкт включает в себя общие или сходные убеждения или мнения, усвоенные в ходе социализации, а также эмоциональные установки, поведенческие и языковые особенности. Утверждается, что конструирование основанной на патриотизме российской национальной идентичности напрямую связано с историческим прошлым, политической идеологией, а также целями и задачами, которые ставит государство. Патриотические настроения в России, как правило, усиливаются на фоне жизненно важных драматических событий или вызовов, с которыми сталкивается страна; это приводит к использованию множества дискурсивных практик, в значительной мере реализующихся с помощью дискурсивных метафор. Актуальным представляется тезис о том, что дискурсивные метафоры, будучи концептуально обоснованными, служат распространенным когнитивным механизмом, применяемым для объяснения сложного абстрактного концепта национальной идентичности. Его значение определяется относительно того или иного периода времени и контекста, в котором разворачивается дискурс. В отличие от концептуальных метафор, которые считаются универсальными, независимыми от времени, дискурсивные метафоры изменяются или развиваются в рамках разворачивающегося дискурса и предназначены для конкретных целей. В данной статье показано, как конкретные метафоры могут служить дискурсивными механизмами конструирования национальной идентичности для достижения культурных и исторических стратегических целей. Авторы утверждают, что сочетание рекуррентных метафор в публичном дискурсе образует целостный расширенный метафорический нарратив, продвигающий особый взгляд на русскость, и оказывают влияние на некоторых из них.

**Ключевые слова:** национальная идентичность, концептуальная метафора, когнитивный механизм, дискурсивная метафора, метафорический нарратив, русскость.

**Цитирование.** Скрынникова И. В., Астафурова Т. Н. Конструирование современной российской идентичности дискурсивными метафорами // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 2, Языкознание. – 2020. – Т. 19, № 3. – С. 107–115. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2020.3.10>

## Introduction

The concept of national identity is known to be notoriously vague giving rise to its diverse interpretations. The Russian academic tradition often replaces the term “identity” with the one of “self-consciousness” [Tishkov, 2013]. Despite the ostensible similarity of the two concepts, they are hardly synonyms. What national identity means is mainly the sense of being part of a certain state or nation, individuals share with a group of people regardless of their country of citizenship. Another difficulty in defining what national identity is arises solely in the Russian context when we have to distinguish between ethnic Russian and the Russian Federation. In the current paper, we assume these terms should be complementary, not opposite.

Following R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl, the paper treats national identity as constructed and communicated in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture, which emerges from

a multitude of discursive practices. National identity is, therefore, the product of discourse [Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, 1999, p. 153]. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus [Bourdieu, 1991, p. 78–87] and following R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl by identity we understand a complex mental structure, containing what is perceived to be knowledge. It encompasses common or similar beliefs or opinions internalized in the course of socialization, including those concerning certain out-groups distinguished from the national ‘we-group’ [Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, 1999, p. 164]. In addition, identity includes the level of emotional attitudes and that of behavioural dispositions, as well as certain linguistic dispositions. Strengthening national identity can hardly be achieved without systematic support provided by archaic beliefs reflected in symbols and shared myths.

Russian national identity with patriotism at its core is claimed to directly depend on the country’s historical background, inherent political ideologies,

objectives and tasks the state formulates. Russian patriotism is a purely mental construct originating from paganism, manifesting itself in citizens' loyalty to their Mother country seen as a many-faced deity, in the unconditional love for it, the strife to protect it, be proud of it and its people [Nabokova, 2016]. Patriotic feelings in Russia tend to boost due to some life-changing dramatic events or challenges the country has to face.

### **Methodological approach and literature review**

The role of metaphor in the discourse of constructing national identities and foreign policy cannot be underestimated and is of particular interest to researchers in various fields [Lakoff, 1996; 2006; Shimko, 1994; Cohn, 1993; Chilton, 1996; Budaev, Chudinov, 2006; Steuter, Wills, 2008]. Cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis line of research, the paper heavily relies on, has repeatedly stressed that conceptual metaphor is an essential element of both language and cognition serving as a pervasive cognitive mechanism applied to explain complex abstract concepts through establishing the set of conceptual correspondences (mappings) to more familiar concrete embodied concepts. Being similar to analogy, it appears to be a form of the so called "mental saving" [Shimko, 1994, p. 660]. Hence is the ubiquitous use of metaphors in the discussion of political issues (foreign and domestic policy, national identity, etc) which are rife with abstract concepts that need to be clearly explained and communicated to the people of a certain nation.

In recent years, numerous studies have addressed the crucial role of metaphor in the language of politics, promoting cultural conceptual models through root metaphors and constructing and promoting certain ideologies [Chilton, 1996; Musolff, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2004; Goatly, 1997]. They have focused on *discourse metaphors* that, despite being conceptually grounded, still have meaning shaped in relation to a particular period of time and the context where a debate on a particular topic is unfolding. The source concepts of such metaphors refer to salient objects or events that are part of interactional space and/or are dominant in cultural imagination. Unlike conceptual metaphors that are considered to be universal, independent of time, discourse

metaphors change or evolve within the ongoing discourse and are intended for specific purposes. This distinction is critical for our study since the current paper seeks to demonstrate how particular metaphors can serve as discursive mechanisms of constructing the national identity to meet both culturally and historically specific strategic objectives. Therefore, discourse metaphors frame and promote shared narratives of politics; being embedded in discursive networks of power, they reflect certain views of the world and society [Koteyko, Brown, Crawford, 2008].

The current paper claims that a combination of co-occurring metaphors in the public discourse forms a holistic extended metaphorical narrative promoting a particular view of Russianness. Metaphorical narratives possess a high-level organizational structure which incorporates: generic plot roles (e.g., protagonist, antagonist, helpers, victims), a background, a complication, a main event (e.g., a struggle, test / trial, decision / other crucial event), a resolution), the consequence, and the moral [Lakoff, Narayanan, 2010]. It is also worth mentioning that conceptually all the narrative components are linearly ordered in the conceptual logic of the plot [Skrynnikova, Astafurova, Sytina, 2017]. This approach echoes the Lakoffian view [Lakoff, 2004] that one of the functions that metaphor performs in political discourse is legitimizing policies through providing access to the system of underlying social and cultural values.

However, one should take into account that, along with focusing on a particular aspect of the concept, metaphor can also overshadow its other aspects which become incompatible with it [Lakoff, Johnson, 1980]. For this reason, the significant manipulative potential of metaphors is unquestionable, which explains their abundance in political rhetoric, since the effects of metaphor on our reasoning and, therefore, behavior is mainly invisible [Steuter, Wills, 2008, p. 7; Skrynnikova, 2018]. In this respect, metaphor is viewed as "a valuable tool in the geopolitical struggle" [Budaev, 2015, p. 13] substantiating G. Lakoff's idea that the mechanisms of metaphoric reasoning are pervasive in foreign and domestic policy discussions where being "backed by bombs, metaphors kill us" [Lakoff, 1992].

Thus, introducing a metaphor in communicating national issues becomes a critical way of meaning

making as K. Cohn has demonstrated in her study into gender metaphorization advocating medium-symbolic violence [Cohn, 1993]. According to P. Bourdieu, symbolic violence as imposing cultural and symbolic practices and a hierarchy of norms and values on citizens' knowledge, advantageous for political actors, largely contributes to and results in social inequality [Bourdieu, 1991]. Employing conceptual metaphors can be treated as a symbolic component of politics, understood as activities of "political actors involved in the production of various methods, interpretations of social reality and the struggle for their dominance in public space" [Malinova, 2012, p. 180].

#### **Metaphors as discursive mechanisms of constructing Russian national identity**

As our literature review shows [Budaev, Chudinov, 2006; Bourmeyster, 1998; Charteris-Black, 2005; Koteyko, Ryazanova-Clarke, 2009; Martynova, 2011; Neumann, 1998; Ryabov, Ryabova, 2016; Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, 1999], the Russian patriotic discourse is mainly dominated by four metaphors: 1) the journey / path, 2) building / construction, 3) mother and 4) bear metaphors. The former one is commonly used along with building metaphors in the public speeches delivered by President Putin over the time of his office. As analogies found in public discourse rely on stereotypical representations of routine situations to add some evaluation of contested topics [Musolff, 2004] as well as to boost legitimacy of political initiatives [Cap, 2006; Charteris-Black, 2005], it is of particular interest to us to explore how these metaphors are applied as part of patriotization strategies underlying the construction of the Russian national identity.

Journey / path and building metaphors have been extensively studied in cognitive linguistic research since Lakoff and Johnson's seminal book "Metaphors We Live by" [Lakoff, Johnson, 1980, p. 44]. LOVE / LIFE IS A JOURNEY which is a primary metaphor verbalized in such expressions as *we are at the crossroads, our marriage is on the rocks, our relationships are a dead-end street* stresses a purposeful activity of moving along a path towards a destination. Another dominant source domain for conceptualizing abstract complex entities in terms of substances or things that are familiar to

us from our routine bodily experiences is the domain of building / construction [Kövecses, 2002].

The *path metaphor* historically originates from the Soviet era and traditionally tends to co-occur with the building metaphor, emphasizing that socialism was the building to be constructed with the Communist party being both the architect and the builder [Bourmeyster, 1998, p. 77]. Subsequently, the discourse of *perestroika* was designed to enhance the existing social formation where the journey / road and construction / building metaphors prevailed. At that point, the most pervasive metaphor, related to the Soviet development, in M. Gorbachev's public speeches was the one of dead-end (*tupik*), and the verb *perestraivat' / perestroit'* (to restructure) stressed the need for political and economic changes. This is when the expression *Common European House* appeared to call for the paramount importance of collaborating with European nations [Chilton, Ilyin, 1993, p. 10] and to outline a different objective for the building metaphor: constructing a state based on the rule of the market economy and law. In the post-perestroika era, Boris Yeltsin initiated a somewhat different use of the *path* metaphor aimed at finding a unifying 'Russian idea', when he realized the pressing need for devising a common political language and an ideology aimed at replacing the Communist views. This marked the start of yet another cycle of the country's search for a unique Russian path. In more recent years, Vladimir Putin's discursive mechanisms of constructing a patriotism-based Russian national identity have been exercised through his creative use of path and building metaphors.

Given the fact that metaphor is a multimodal phenomenon which means it can be found not only in language, but also in visuals and gestures, it may serve as an effective means of constructing national identity through employing symbols as visual metaphoric representations of Russianness. Throughout centuries, the *maternal* image of Russia has proven to be particularly powerful. The origins of the maternal nature of the country should be attributed to the image of Mother Earth – the Russian version of Great Mother Goddess. The maternal symbol of Russia is still prevalent in practices of constructing the Russian national identity. As far as emphasizing external symbolic boundaries of "Russianness" is concerned, i.e. stressing differences of Russians from alien

“others”, the idea of being different and opposed to the West has been traced in the Russian identity throughout centuries. One of the strikingly strong symbols of the Russian culture perpetuating this difference is Russia presented as a Woman, Mother as “the embodiment of humility, selflessness, religiosity, irrationality, collegiality, i.e., values alien to Western individualism, rationality, secularity, pride” [Ryabov, 2007].

The maternal image of Russia itself and the specificity of attitudes to the country as to the Motherland have become an important element of the Russian national identity as a whole. These features became salient in the discussion of a publication from *the American Business Insider*, the weekly which published a list of “the most absurd buildings of the Soviet era” on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in Great World War II. The monument “Motherland calls!” on the Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd was included in the number of such buildings. The publication triggered immediate response from Russian politicians, historians and public figures accusing American journalists of ignorance and blasphemy; the features which gave rise to animalistic analogies establishing conceptual mappings between immoral behaviour and dirt: It’s none of the swines’ (referring to Americans) business to discuss the architecture of a great power we have lost” (<http://nsn.fm/culture/ne-ikh-svinyachedelo-kritikovat-rodinu-mat.php>). The publication has been widely discussed in the Internet, social networks and blogs which enabled us to reveal the ways of involving the country’s image of Mother into establishing external symbolic borders. In the context of the current research the following aspects are crucial: in the first place, the image of Mother Russia serves as a metaphorical marker of national identity enabling to distinguish between “us” and “them” and justify the superiority of the former over the latter; moreover, the topic is part and parcel of the discussion about the attitudes to homeland in Russia and the USA. Those who discussed the topic compared the Mother Russia Monument in Volgograd to Statue of Liberty in New York. Russian journalists tend to blame American ones for moral inferiority, lack of integrity, callousness and disrespect for the sacred: “What wonder? There is nothing sacred in America: no Homeland, no Mother! Only dollars!” [Pushkov, 2015].

Another metaphor commonly arising in the discourse of Russian national identity is *Russia is a Bear*. Resorting to this metaphor affects both the perception of the country in the international arena and decisions made by Russian officials to promote a particular view of the country. In Western discourse, a bear metaphor emphasizes a symbolic border with Russia, being called upon to mark its non-European essence and the resulting aggressiveness and backwardness. Employing the Russian bear metaphor in international relations from a foreign perspective contributes to the mobilization of negative values assigned to the image of the “Russian bear”; of current contradictions between Russia and the West through emphasizing their essential and therefore ineradicable nature. Applying the metaphor within this country is aimed at the homogenization of Russians resulting in the idea of their collective responsibility for the country’s foreign and domestic policy and preventing their dehumanization, deprivation of the human face. The current use of the bear metaphor reveals a significant increase in self-identifying of Russia with the bear which triggers anti-Western and isolationist sentiments and reinforces them.

The bear metaphor from a foreign perspective is increasingly gaining visual representation in other semiotic systems [Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, 1999, p. 153] (e.g. caricatures and demotivators) and is commonly referred to not only by journalists, but also expert communities and politicians, i.e. those who are in charge of foreign policy decisions. For instance, the report on “Russian propaganda in Europe” (July 2016) prepared by the Center for European Studies is titled “*The Bear in Sheep’s Clothing*” (<http://www.martenscentre.eu/publications>) features an ancient proverb: “*A Russian bear never dies, it just hibernates*” while a candidate for US vice president criticizes Russia during a television debate. The pervasiveness of the bear metaphor in foreign policy rhetoric and national identity discourse suggests its high significance and value yielding the corresponding inferences about the country and its citizens. Being a significant factor of Russian culture, the bear appears in many Russian literary works, folk tales, epics, proverbs and sayings, frequently acting as a protagonist. The bear has been continuously depicted on the emblems, coats of arms, sports flags (e.g. the 1980

Olympic Games in Moscow, the emblem of the United Russia party, etc.).

Analyzing the functions of the bear metaphor, the cognitive one seems particularly salient and critical as it enables to conceptualize Russia as “a big, strong and therefore potentially dangerous country” [Neumann, 1998, p. 239]. Moreover, the image of the Russian Otherness has become particularly helpful in specifying the positive European collective identity by setting the boundaries of Civilization. The current fear of the “Russian bear”, known as Russophobia, spurs the creation of a pan-European political identity and legitimization of the European Union [Ryabov, Ryabova, 2016]. Furthermore, the metaphor also serves as a tool Western societies resort to in their internal political struggle. Historically, charging political rivals with sympathies for Russia has been traditionally expressed in depicting them in the guise of a bear. Finally, the bear metaphor can be helpful in justifying a certain foreign policy towards Russia, in the propaganda of the military conflicts from the Napoleonic Wars to Cold War and the current economic sanctions [Ryabov, Lazari, 2009].

The shift in applying the bear metaphor domestically can also be traced. Unlike the USSR bear whose image was employed to mainly illustrate the specificity of the perceiving the country by its Western detractors, the post-Soviet bear as a national symbol is involved in communicating domestic policies. The emblem of the Russian ruling party has featured a bear since 1999, which has been subsequently used in diverse forms of political branding both in the course of legitimization of power and its delegitimization. However, the growing popularity of the bear as a national symbol can hardly be attributed solely to political propaganda but rather to creating a post-Soviet identity, based on the opposition both to the Soviet period and Western civilization. In the 2000s the bear became part of the changing national identity, which can be referred to as “remasculinization of Russia”, i.e. endowing the image of the country with masculine connotations (strength, rationality, autonomy) and the creation of attractive patterns of national masculinity [Ryabov, Ryabova, 2016].

Combining aforementioned multimodal metaphors results in the extended metaphorical narrative of Russian national identity unfolding and implemented in political and public speeches,

political cartoons and caricatures, and their manipulative potential increases manifold [Steuter, Wills, 2008; Skrynnikova, 2018]. It enables to effectively communicate and promote a view of Russia which is to an advantage of certain political actors or meets the needs arising in a particular social and political climate. Therefore, the critical role of narrative and metaphor at the level of conceptual processing mechanisms and meaning making is not questionable. Narrative and metaphor are now seen as integral to cognition, communication and action.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the abundance of studies on the crucial role of metaphor in political language, deployment of cultural conceptual models, and the formulation of ideologies, there is still little evidence of figurative conceptualization impact on understanding such highly abstract concepts as national identity. Another gap in the present line of research can be found in the lack of studies of the effects of particular figurative language use on the construction of national identity in this country.

In an attempt to close this gap the paper has addressed the related fields of metaphor research, discourse studies and research on nations and the national, specifying the levels at which metaphor becomes vital to the study of these concepts. By examining the dominant patterns of metaphorical conceptualization of Russia and Russians, it argues and seems to provide sufficient evidence that metaphor serves as a powerful discursive mechanism of constructing national identity aimed at achieving not only culturally but also historically specific strategic objectives.

The presented literature review leads us to conclude that Russian national identity with patriotism at its core is constructed taking into consideration the country’s historical background, inherent political ideologies, objectives and tasks the state considers to be primary for a particular period. The Russian patriotic discourse is rife with the path / road, building / construction, mother and bear metaphors reflecting the dominant conceptualizations of Russianness. The major claim of the paper, which might serve as a basis for future research, therefore, is that cumulative

employment of these metaphors contributes to developing patriotization strategies which underlie the construction of the Russian national identity. Combining these co-occurring metaphors in the public discourse forms a holistic extended metaphorical narrative promoting a comprehensive view of Russianness. Far from providing an exhaustive list of metaphorical conceptualization patterns of Russian national identity, the paper suggests some implications concerning further employment of figurative language as an instrument of national identity construction.

Emphasizing and promoting a certain metaphorical national narrative, treated as a set of related and co-occurring metaphors, enables to significantly increase the transformative and manipulative effect of employing metaphors in the discursive construction of national identity on national mentality within a country as well as on the views of the country by foreign communities.

The findings of the study may be applied as guidelines for further research in critical metaphor discourse analysis, political science in general and political linguistics in particular as well as for training professionals in the related fields.

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