

# Eponyms as Cultural Key Words and Their Lexicographic Description in English and Russian

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on some aspects of the cultural and lexicographic description of eponyms in Russian and English (predominantly American English). The discussion of these aspects is viewed as a step toward creating a bilingual cross-cultural dictionary of eponyms. The dictionary should familiarize users with overlapping and distinct aspects of the cultures' collective memory, thus assisting speakers of different languages to better understand each other and each other's cultures. The term *eponym* is used here in reference to people (real people, Biblical and literary characters, gods and heroes in Greek and Roman mythology, etc.) whose names or derivatives thereof have distinct cultural associations and have become an inalienable part of cultural discourse. The eponyms are regarded as cultural key words, inasmuch as they represent a common heritage for different—in our case Russian- and English-speaking—cultures. The paper discusses the following lexicographic aspects of a dictionary of eponyms: the word list; linguistic factors characterizing an eponym's stability in the lexicon; methods of describing eponyms from grammatical, encyclopedic, and socio-cultural standpoints; and the cross-cultural correlation between eponyms. A dictionary of eponyms would fill an important but underappreciated gap in the available inventory of lexical and cross-cultural resources.

## 1 Introduction

This paper focuses on some aspects of the cultural and lexicographic description of eponyms in Russian and English (predominantly American English). The discussion of these aspects is viewed as a step toward creating a bilingual cross-cultural dictionary of eponyms. Despite their cross-cultural significance, issues related to eponyms have not yet drawn attention of theoretical lexicography, and bilingual dictionary-making in the area of eponyms is not far ahead.

Traditionally, the term "eponym" is used in reference to "a person whose name is or is thought to be the source of the name of something, such as a city, country, or era" [American Heritage 2000]. Douglas [1990] adds one more meaning, which implies cultural connotations: "A real or fictitious person whose name has become synonymous with an era, event, object, practice, or the like." In this paper, "eponym" is used in a narrower than traditional sense, namely, in reference to people (real people, Biblical and literary characters, gods and heroes in Greek and Roman mythology, etc.) whose names or derivatives thereof have distinct *cultural* associations and have become an inalienable part of cultural discourse. Generally, these names are associated with a certain (sometimes more than one) quality, character trait, mode of behavior, etc. Eponyms add human individuality to literary, political and other types of discourse. A substantial number of items in this subset of eponyms represent a common heritage for Russian- and English-speaking cultures. The

selected inventory also includes a few names that have correlates, albeit not exact matches, in each culture (i.e., Eng. *Scrooge* and Rus. *Плюшкин*).

Our ultimate goal is to investigate the similarities and differences between the delineated class of eponyms in the two cultures as well as the types of information needed for their lexicographic presentation.

The names under consideration differ not only in spelling and pronunciation—they may also differ in how firmly they are rooted in the lexicon, in their semantic associations, collocational specifics, and cultural connotations.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we survey the treatment of eponyms in existing dictionaries, followed by a description of the linguistic factors that characterize eponyms' stability in the language, which is an obligatory prerequisite for their inclusion in the word list. Then we discuss eponyms as a subset of the lexicon, and conclude by discussing how eponyms could be described in a bilingual dictionary with a cross-cultural focus.

## 2 The Treatment of Eponyms in Existing Dictionaries

The function of eponyms as a special category of cultural key words, and particularly their cross-cultural interpretation and translatability, have not yet been widely discussed. Many if not most existing dictionaries of eponyms, e.g., [Beeching 1979], [Douglas 1990], and [Freeman 1997] are monolingual.<sup>1</sup> There are substantial differences between their word lists, which perhaps could be explained by the compilers' different interpretations of the term "eponym." In addition to dictionaries of eponyms per se, other types of dictionaries include some eponyms: dictionaries of allusions, e.g., [Urdang & Ruffner 1982] and [Cole & Lass 2001], dictionaries of "winged words" [Berkov et al. 2000], dictionaries of clichés [Korneev 1997], and bilingual encyclopedic and area-studies dictionaries, such as *Americana* [Chernov et al. 1996]. Special dictionaries of eponyms, allusions, and the like, differ greatly in their presentation of eponyms. Some of them include proper names or phrases that contain proper names, but for the most part present them without a broad cultural context. Consider how Hamlet is presented in various dictionaries. The *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Phrase and Allusion* [Rees 1991] contains "*Hamlet without the Prince*" ("Referring to an event without the leading participant") but does not include *Hamlet*. Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary of Allusions* [Webber & Feinsilber 1999] does include *Hamlet* with the description "A legendary Danish prince and hero of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, or someone who behaves like the Shakespearean character—soul-searching, melancholy, and tortured by indecision." This dictionary also provides examples of contemporary contexts in which *Hamlet* is used (but does not include "*Hamlet without the Prince*"). For our purposes, perhaps the most relevant monolingual presentation of Hamlet can be found in the thesaurus *Allusions* [Urdang & Ruffner 1982], where it is placed in the categories 'Indecision', 'Insecurity', and 'Vengeance'. Similarly, *Napoleon* is found in 'Conquest'; *Don Juan*—in 'Lust', 'Profligacy', and 'Punishment'; and *Don Quixote*—in 'Chivalry' and 'Illusion'. One reservation about listing eponyms according to one or more distinguishing features is its subjectivity, with placement into one or another category being subject to the compiler's interpretation.

A monolingual dictionary, like Urdang & Ruffner [1982], does not have to concern itself with an eponym's counterpart(s) in another language and culture. E.g., the compilers included *Hitler* in their word list (they placed *Hitler* in four categories: 'Anti-Semitism', 'Bigotry', 'Brutality', and 'Conquest'), but did not include *Stalin* at all (they did include *Ivan the Terrible*, though). In a Russian dictionary such an omission would be inconceivable.

Bilingual dictionaries of eponyms are scarce. One such dictionary is *Англо-русский словарь персоналий—English-Russian Who's Who in Fact and Fiction* [Ermolovich 1993], which has about 5000 headwords. It provides the spelling and pronunciation of names, some encyclopedic information and brief references; however, it is unidirectional and as such does not include any Russian or Soviet names, with the exception of Russians who became part of English-speaking cultures (like *Nabokov*). Likewise, it does not provide any cross-cultural information.

A sufficient cross-cultural description of eponyms must contain a juxtaposition of cultural associations that characterize the use of eponyms in various types of discourse in both languages. This type of information would undoubtedly make a rich contribution to cross-cultural studies. One of the obvious ways of presenting this information to users is via bilingual, and perhaps multilingual, cross-cultural dictionaries of eponyms. The availability of corpus tools could greatly expedite and raise the quality of this research, permitting the fast compilation of a large inventory of examples of each eponym in authentic contexts. In addition, corpus tools would make it possible to separate eponyms used today, in the modern language, and perhaps even rank them by frequency.

### 3 Selection of Headwords for the Word List

Only eponyms that have acquired culturally relevant connotations belong in this type of dictionary. Other applicable criteria are the eponyms' lexicalized status (discussed in detail below) and frequency of use.

Ideologically charged eponyms present a special difficulty: their frequency in discourse is in direct proportion to their usefulness for the ruling regime. This information should be provided in the entries. For example, it should be indicated that the eponym *Ленин* and its derivatives (*ленинская простота* 'Lenin's approachability/down-to-earth nature', *ленинский стиль руководства* 'Lenin's leadership style', *жить и работать по-ленински* 'live and work like Lenin'), which were overused if not abused during the Soviet period, lost their privileged status with the ascent of *perestroika*.

Although the name of a politician, a popular actor, a character from a popular movie or cartoon, etc., may become quickly associated with some characteristic of its bearer, these connotations might be short-lived and should be distinguished from eponyms covered with the patina of time. This is not to say that contemporary names with an uncertain cultural future should necessarily be excluded; however, before being included they should be evaluated for their promise to ultimately achieve lexicalized status.

Our definition of eponyms excludes items that do not possess a culturally significant status. Most of the excluded items are monosemous words. They are predominantly international technical or scientific terms formed from the names of inventors or authors (e.g., ohm, volt, ampere, curie, Celsius, shrapnel) as well as nomenclature items—names of plants, flowers, types of fabric, and the like (begonia, fuchsia, jacquard). For the most part, they are nouns, less commonly adjectives (often used as part of a phrase, e.g., Gregorian calendar, Fallopian tubes, Caesarean section) or verbs (pasteurize, bowdlerize).

#### 4 Linguistic Factors Characterizing an Eponym's Stability in the Lexicon

The decision to include or exclude an entity in the word list for a bilingual dictionary of eponyms should be informed by its stability in the language, which in turn is suggested by a number of linguistic factors, including the ones detailed below.

##### 4.1 Derivation

The potential for a word to undergo derivational word-formation processes is one indicator of its lexicalized status. However, not all Russian and English eponyms have derivational potential, so this parameter must be considered in relative terms.

Syntactic derivation is characteristic of eponyms in both Russian and English. It is especially productive in the following two areas: 1) nominalization, which is the formation of nouns denoting a trend, school, system, etc., created by the person in question, e.g., *Дарвин* → *дарвинизм*, *Фрейд* → *фрейдизм*; *Darwin* → *Darwinism*, *Freud* → *Freudianism*; and 2) adjectivization, i.e., the formation of relational adjectives, e.g., *Наполеон* → *наполеоновские войны*, *наполеоновская кампания*, *наполеоновская стратегия*; *Napoleon* → *Napoleonic wars*, *Napoleonic campaign*, *Napoleonic strategy*.

Relational adjectives may develop a figurative meaning: *наполеоновские войны* 'Napoleonic wars' vs. (figurative) *наполеоновские замыслы* 'Napoleonic ambitions.' Alternatively, adjectives with a figurative meaning may be derived from an eponym independently: *байроновские образы* 'Byron's images' vs. (figurative) *разочарованные байронические юноши* 'disillusioned Byronic youths.'

An increase in the number of derivational patterns contributes to an eponym's becoming rooted in the lexicon, e.g., in Russian: *донкихотство*, *донкихотский*, *донкихотствовать*; *ницшеанство*, *ницшеанец*, *ницшеанский*; *оруэллизм*; in English: *quixotic(al)*, *quixotically*, *quixotism*; *Darwinian*, *Darwinist*, *Darwinistic*, *neo-Darwinian*; *Nietzschean*, *neo-Nietzschean*). In Russian, with its richness of emotive suffixes, the ability of an entity to produce a derivative with such a suffix is another important factor in favor of its being analyzed as a full-fledged eponym. For example, the suffix *-щин(а)* is used to form abstract nouns from the names of literary characters or real people. These nouns designate qualities, phenomena, or ideological trends associated with the name-bearer, at the same time expressing a somewhat negative attitude toward them: *обломовщина*, *маниловщина*, *хлестаковщина*; *достоевщина* (cf. Обломов, Манилов, Хлестаков; Достоевский). Zemskaja [1992: 189] cites less common examples: *брежневщина*, *сталинщина*, *алиевщина* (cf. Брежнев, Сталин, Алиев).

## 4.2 Grammatical Properties

The ability of a proper name to be used in the plural is another factor suggesting its status as an eponym. Many eponyms acquire this ability, which is called in Russian “de-individualization” “. . . видно, метит в Бруты, / Но времена для Брутов слишком круты, / И не из Брутов ли Наполеон?” (Д. Самойлов. Пестель, поэт и Анна) ‘. . . evidently, [he] aspires to become a Brutus, but times are too hard for the likes of Brutus, and isn’t Napoleon of the same line as Brutus?’ Another example: [Иванов] Я умираю от стыда при мысли, что я, здоровый, сильный человек, обратился не то в Гамлета, не то в Манфреда, не то в лишние люди. . . сам черт не разберет! Есть жалкие люди, которым льстит, когда их называют Гамлетами или лишними, но для меня это— позор! Это возмущает мою гордость, стыд гнетет меня, и я страдаю. . . (А.П. Чехов. Иванов. Действие второе) ‘I could die of shame at the thought that I, a healthy, strong man, have turned into some sort of Hamlet, or Manfred, or superfluous man—God only knows what! There are those persons who are flattered at being called Hamlets or superfluous men, but for me it is—ignominious! My pride is outraged, I am weighed down with shame, and I suffer. . .’ (transl. Ann Dunnigan). A similar English example: “The idea behind the show is to create an unscripted tropical soap opera by turning ordinary Americans into beleaguered Robinson Crusoes” (J. Leo. *U.S. News & World Report*, June 19, 2000).

## 4.3 Building Blocks for Collocations

The occurrence of a proper name in set phrases and idioms is strong evidence for its lexicalized status: e.g., *Augustan Age* and *Elektra complex* in English; *соломоново решение* ‘a decision worthy of Solomon’ in Russian. Some set phrases and idioms occur in both languages: the mark of Cain—*Каинова печать*, Buridan’s ass—*буриданов осел*, Judas kiss—*поцелуй Иуды*, change from Saul to Paul—*стать из Савла Павлом*. In such cases, it is appropriate to indicate whether the eponym in question was borrowed only within the set phrase or can function as a free-standing eponym as well.

The use of eponyms in titles of books and films assumes widespread recognition of the name and its connotations (e.g., *Casanova in Love* by Andrew Miller; *The Memoirs of Cleopatra: A Novel* by Margaret George, and many more). So does the transfer of a nonnative name onto native ground as part of an individually created collocation: N.S. Leskov’s story (and D.D. Shostakovich’s opera) *Леди Макбет Мценского уезда* ‘Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District’, I.S. Turgenev’s *Степной король Лир* ‘King Lear of the Steppes’ and “Гамлет Щигровского уезда” “The Hamlet of the Shchigry District,” from *Notes of a Hunter*.

## 4.4 Eponyms as a Subset of the Lexicon

Comprising a special subset within the lexicon, eponyms nevertheless reflect many of the lexical relations found within the full lexicon. Thematic categories in Urdang’s dictionary include a number of eponyms, thus putting them in a relation somewhat resembling synonymy. E.g., both *Don Juan* and *Casanova* are listed there under ‘Lust’ and ‘Profligacy’. Contextual comparisons confirm this feature: “. . . he adds the bold assertion that Bach was a musical Newton. . .” (J. Butt. *The New Republic*, July 10 & 17, 2000: 22).

Eponyms of this kind resemble “international words” in the common lexicon: while they may somewhat differ in nuances and applications, they preserve their basic meaning in different languages and consequently, preserve—fully or partially—cross-cultural synonymy (for example, the cross-cultural series донжуан, Казанова—*Don Juan, Casanova*). While some names are associated with one category, others may appear in several categories: e.g., Urdang places *Solomon* in the categories ‘Justice’, ‘Polygamy’, ‘Wealth’, and ‘Wisdom’. These categories define the contexts for a “polysemous” eponym.

In addition to synonymic relations, eponyms may have quasi-synonymic relations (‘tyrants’—Nero, Hitler, Stalin).

Eponyms may also stand in a quasi-antonymic relation. One antonymic pair in Russian culture is the opposition *Моцарт—Сальери* (‘genius’—‘mediocrity’, or even ‘mediocrity driven to kill the genius’), which became widely accepted because of the popularity of Pushkin’s *Моцарт и Сальери*.

Many eponyms entered the scene of world culture in pairs and retain strong associations with the other member of the pair: David and Goliath, Cain and Abel, Friday and Robinson Crusoe, Pygmalion and Galatea, Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Typical Soviet examples are Marx and Engels and, at some point, Lenin and Stalin—until Stalin decided that he did not need company. The relations between the paired elements are often similar to typical lexical relations—synonymy, antonymy, conversive, etc. E.g.:

- Castor and Pollux / *Кастор и Поллукс*—synonymy in both Russian and English;
- *Моцарт и Сальери*—quasi-antonymy in Russian;
- Capulets and Montagues / *Монтекки и Капулетти* (in this order)—quasi-antonymy in both English and Russian;
- Jesus—Judas / *Иисус—Иуда* ‘the one who was betrayed’—‘the one who betrayed’, Caesar—Brutus / *Цезарь—Брут* ‘the one who was betrayed and killed’—‘the one who betrayed and killed’—conversives in both English and Russian.

The above factors should act as additional diagnostics for lexicographers to select eponyms that have become part of the lexicon.

## 5 Types of Information in a Cross-Cultural Dictionary of Eponyms

Eponyms possess both grammatical and extralinguistic properties, and therefore could be described from a grammatical, encyclopedic, or socio-cultural standpoint. We believe that a dictionary entry in a bilingual cross-cultural dictionary should cover all these aspects.

### 5.1 Spelling and Pronunciation

Although most of the eponyms under consideration are part of a common cultural heritage, they may differ in spelling, beyond the difference between the alphabets, and pronunciation. These differences result from idiosyncratic and changing conventions in English and Russian for assimilating foreign names. E.g., English has an established tradition of borrowing German names in their original spelling and pronunciation, while Russian has

had to make adjustments to the Cyrillic alphabet (*Ницше* [nitsshe]—*Nietzsche*, *Фрейд* [freid]—*Freud*, *Гегель* [gegel']—*Hegel*). There are similar differences in names 1) deriving from Greek and Latin (e.g., *Эдун*—*Oedipus*), 2) coming from Russian into English (*Чайковский*—*Tchaikovsky* or *Chaikovsky*), and 3) coming from English into Russian (*Einstein*—*Эйнштейн*). Finally, certain inconsistencies in the Russian spelling of foreign names are due to the employment of transliteration vs. transcription from the 19th century through the first third of the 20th century.

## 5.2 The Encyclopedic Description

This zone of the entry must include the referential correlation of each name with: a real person and his biography (*Napoleon*, *Mozart*); a person whose existence in real life has not been established and the legend about his/her life (*Homer*); a literary or mythological character from a literary work or myth and the plot of that work or myth (*Hamlet*, *Hercules*), etc. Therefore, this section of a dictionary entry should contain biographical information or information related to the relevant legend, myth, or plot.

## 5.3 The Grammatical Description

This zone should include *the* eponym's paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and derivational characteristics, and a chronology of its becoming part of the lexicon.

## 5.4 The Socio-Cultural Description

This part of the entry should elucidate an eponym's function as a socio-cultural stereotype. In this connection, of particular interest are groups of eponyms that represent

- 1) stereotyped social roles: 'a great poet' (*Dante* / *Данте*), 'a conqueror' (*Alexander the Great* / *Александр Македонский*), 'a great orator' (*Cicero* / *Цицерон*, *Demosthenes* / *Демосфен*);
- 2) a characteristic, socially important property: 'a great patriot' (*Paul Revere* / *Иван Сусанин*), 'traitor' (*Judas* / *Иуда*), 'a great scientist/genius' (*Einstein*);
- 3) a universal human quality or trait: stinginess (*Scrooge* / *Плюшкин*);
- 4) appearance: 'feminine beauty' (*Venera* / *Venus*—and *Scarlett O'Hara* for a Southern belle), 'ugliness' (*Quasimodo* / *Квасимодо*).

A proper name turns into a stereotype as a result of the preference of one or, in some cases, more than one interpretation over other possible interpretations. E.g., while possible stereotypical characteristics of Judas could be 'betrayal and greed' and of Solomon, 'wisdom and experience in love' (cf. *The Song of Solomon* vs. *The Third Book of the Kings*, *Книга Песни Песней Соломона* vs. *Третья Книга Царств*), in both English-speaking and Russian-speaking cultures Judas is referentially associated with betrayal, and Solomon is primarily associated with wisdom (cf. *соломоново решение* / *be he a Solomon*).

The same eponym may be interpreted in different cultures differently, e.g. *Daedalus* and *Icarus* in Russian- and English-speaking cultures. Of *Daedalus* "Because he was so clever with his hands, any intricate, cunningly formed object is termed daedal. All pioneers are called daedalists" [Espy 1978]. In Russian, however, his name has not become an eponym and is mainly used in connection with his being *Icarus's* father. *Icarus* has rather negative connotations in English: "Someone who flies high, disregards warnings, and pays the price

for hubris and pride” [Webber & Feinsilber 1999]; “resumptuous ambition, ending in ruin or failure; among the young, the obsessive disregard of what elders advise. . .” [Trahair 1994]. In Russian, however, *Icarus*’s name is associated with the aesthetics of revolutionary romanticism and has positive connotations. *Икар*: “Об отчаянно отважном человеке; о чьих-л. отчаянно смелых (обычно — тщетных) дерзаниях” (‘of a recklessly daring person; of someone’s recklessly daring actions (that usually fail)’ [Berkov et al. 2000].

The socio-cultural zone in a bilingual dictionary entry must also describe cultural connotations formed in each of the two languages and include information on the types of discourse in which each eponym is conventionally used (literary or political discourse, advertisement, etc.). Special mention also must be made of cases where eponyms are used as product names in catalogs (e.g., *Cleopatra lamp and Cleopatra print/ сигареты Петр I*, etc.), personal names of people (e.g., *Горацій Иванович*) and animals (e.g. *Sheba* for cats, *Elvis* for dogs, etc.), and the like.

Additionally, this zone should include information on the history of each eponym and its derivatives in the language; and, in the case of borrowings, whether the item came directly from the source language or through intermediary languages. For eponyms related to ideological movements, social upheavals, etc., it would be invaluable to provide information on whether the process of borrowing was accompanied by any ideological re-interpretation.

### 5.5 Cross-Cultural Correlation

A bilingual dictionary must include multicultural and monocultural eponyms. Multicultural eponyms may have 1) similar connotations (either predominantly similar, i.e., with more similarities than differences—*Byron / Байрон*, or completely the same—*Judas kiss / поцелуй Иуды*) and 2) different connotations (either partially different—*Don Quixote / Дон Кихот*, or completely different—*Icarus / Икар*).

Monocultural eponyms must include a) items that are used predominantly in one language/culture as a fact or phenomenon of that culture but are translated verbatim into other languages and retain a foreign flavor (e.g., *потемкинские деревни / Potemkin villages*); b) items that are used exclusively in one language/culture as a fact or phenomenon of that culture and would have little or no meaning if translated verbatim (*тургеневские девушки* in Russian and *Gibson girl* in English; *Ivan Susanin* and *Paul Revere*).<sup>2</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

The goal of a bilingual cross-cultural dictionary of eponyms is to help users to understand history, culture, and the history of cultures. It should familiarize users with similar and different forms of collective memory, thus assisting speakers of different languages to better understand each other and each other’s culture.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A new Russian monolingual dictionary of “winged words” [Berkov et al. 2000] includes some important eponyms (*Гамлет*, *донкихот*, *донжуан*, and more), providing their source, explication, citations, and also their derivatives and synonyms where applicable.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that, occasionally, a "regular" word that has strong social and cultural significance in its own language (to lynch) may be borrowed by another language (Rus. линчевать, линчевание, суд Линча) and may even be used metaphorically, but rarely develops any additional connotations in the language that borrowed it.

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