

Douglas Mark Ponton*

University of Catania, Catania, Italy

Dilyara Davletshina**

Institute of International Relations, Moscow, Russia

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM: AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN COVID POETRY***

Abstract

The United Kingdom and Russia have been viewed as representing divergent national characteristics in terms of indicators of an individualistic vs. a collective approach to life, and our study considers cross-cultural factors involved in the way the two groups have conceptualised, and lived through, the recent experience of lockdown. The COVID-19 crisis, in fact, was accompanied in most nations worldwide by social measures curtailing what have long been seen as fundamental liberties, and this has stimulated the re-emergence of old controversies about the nature of personal freedom, democracy versus state control, the right to healthcare, the distribution of wealth, and so on. We explore poems produced in the two social contexts during lockdown, as people responded to the dramatic circumstances, turning to poetry to communicate their private feelings. The poems are not analysed according to criteria of literary merit; rather, they are explored from the perspective of the linguistic theory of proximation, viewed from an intercultural

* dponton@unict.it

** english1@mgimo.ru

*** This publication has been supported by the RUDN University Scientific Projects Grant System, project № 050734-2-000.

standpoint. We ponder the question of whether Russia's supposedly 'collective' mindset may be observed at work in these texts, contrasting with an 'individualistic' response in the Anglo context; whether such generalised, even stereotypical notions have any meaning in a crisis such as that provoked by COVID.

Key Words: *COVID 19, Russia, poetry, proximation, intercultural, individualism, collectivism.*

INTRODUCTION

The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global social structures, economies, and behavior patterns) are yet to be fully understood (Lone and Ahmad, 2020). In the first period, restrictive measures were so stringent that what used to be normal social activity became a distant memory. People everywhere adapted to concepts like 'lockdown', which normalized a state of house arrest; or 'social distancing', which required them to communicate with friends and family at a safe distance, while social events such as church services, sporting fixtures, theatre, etc., were suspended indefinitely. Our paper highlights lingua-cultural nuances in response to the crisis from the populations of two nations, the UK and Russia. It explores cross-cultural implications that may be involved in how the pandemic has been represented in each national group. The repressive social measures that accompanied the crisis brought to the fore old controversies about individualism vs. collectivism, the nature of personal freedom, democracy versus state control, the right to healthcare, the distribution of wealth, and so on.

As the work of Sapir/Whorf testifies (Konrad Koerner 1992), linguistic practices may reflect deep-seated habits of being that characterize different countries, and thus our research may shed light on long-standing questions of national stereotypes. We look at British and Russian poetical texts that illustrate responses to the COVID-19 outbreak assuming that, by comparing these microlinguistic practices, it is possible to learn something concerning the cultural realities of the countries in question, along the general lines proposed in the comparative cultural works of Hofstede (2001, 2010), Wierzbicka (1991, 2002) and Larina (2015).

The next sections discuss Russian and British national stereotypes from a historical-cultural perspective, focusing especially on the dimension of individualism/collectivism.

NATIONAL STEREOTYPES: RUSSIA AND THE UK

Research by Hofstede attempts to deal scientifically with the abstraction 'national character'. As Hofstede (2001) notes, this concept, which relates to the 'relatively enduring personality characteristics and patterns that are modal among the adult members of the society' (Inkeles & Levinson, 1997: 17), was widely studied in Anthropology in the early 20th century. Though some research seems to indicate that different national groups do indeed differ from one another in interesting ways (Peabody, 1985), the differences also feature in stereotypes that color thinking about other national groups. Stereotypes suggest that the American is talkative and easy-going, Brits are sporting and home-loving, the French romantic, Germans methodical, and so on (Mace, 1943). Russians are usually considered hospitable and highly cultured.

Stereotypes develop over time in the popular imagination and are often seen as factors that may hinder cross-cultural communication, create problems for the assimilation of migrants, and generally interfere with a true perception of the other (Schneider, 2004). It is not Hofstede's intention to probe the accuracy of national stereotypes, however. He identifies several contrasting general parameters and situates national groups at various points between the two poles, thus enabling a range of large-scale comparisons that may, or may not, conform to stereotypical expectations.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

One of these parameters is a conceptualization of people as driven by an individualistic or a collective logic, and this index is applied in our study. As Hofstede explains:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede et al., 2010; 92).

It is widely believed that Britons tend to illustrate the former term (Tower et al 1997), and as Wierzbicka says, it is possible to find linguistic evidence in support of this. She notes, for example, that Russian has no

expression corresponding to the English 'self-assertion' (Wierzbicka 1991: 71). English proverbs and sayings with an individualistic flavor are numerous: 'every man for himself', 'the Devil take the hindmost', 'to each his own', 'an Englishman's home is his castle', 'I'm alright Jack', 'look after number one', 'self-made man', 'just be yourself', etc.¹ In Russian, by contrast, people tend to focus on a sense of togetherness: "With the whole family together, one feels at ease" ("*Vsya semya vmeste, tak i dusha na meste*"), "A Russian can't live without his relatives" ("*Russkiy bez rodney ne zhivoyot*").

In Wierzbicka's words, the English respond to a characteristically Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition: a tradition which places special emphasis on the rights and on the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people's affairs (*It's none of my business*), which is tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, which respects everyone's privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of dogmatism of any kind (Wierzbicka 1991: 30)²

Other socio-historical factors suggestive of an individualistic streak in the British national character may be identified, such as the embrace of neoliberalism in the post-Thatcher era (Mullen et al., 2013), the country's historical lack of a Communist party comparable in strength to European counterparts (Callaghan & Harker, 2011), the self-reliant ethos of its public schools (Nicholls, 1989), and so on. Finally, cultural developments like reality television and social media have seen confirmation in Anglo circles of what has been called the 'Me generation' (Twenge, 2014).

Britain also has collective credentials, as one of the oldest European democracies, one of the earliest to experiment, however briefly, with republicanism, and the first European country to introduce free health care for all. However, according to Hofstede's analysis Britain, together with the USA, is a prime example of an individualistic culture.

The Russian case is different. Wierzbicka (1991: 106), for example, notes that Anglo grammar, with its undifferentiated second- and third-person pronoun 'you', does not encourage intimacy, and highlights the greater propensity, in Russian society, for behavior that suggests interpersonal closeness:

¹ Naturally there are also linguistic traces of this contrary position, for example in sayings like 'there's no 'I' in team'. 'Two heads are better than one', 'a problem shared is a problem halved', etc.

² It is worth noting when these words were written; Wierzbicka is clearly describing a version of Anglo culture free from the intrusive demands of social media, which have largely re-written social scripts in personal privacy, especially for the young.

Anglo-Saxon culture does not encourage unrestrained display of emotions. In adult English speech diminutives (even those few diminutives which English does have) feel out of place, just as non-erotic kissing and hugging feels often out of place [...] American students of Russia and things Russian are amazed by the amount of touching, kissing, and hugging which visibly takes place among the Russians (Wierzbicka 1991: 53)

In their 1997 cross-cultural study of Anglo-Russian social attitudes, Tower et al found that:

the single most important aspect which distinguishes Russian collectivism from British individualism is the conflict between the pursuit of personal and group goals, where Russian participants stressed the importance of preserving in-group harmony and following group goals whilst the British stressed the pursuit of personal goals (Tower et al. 1997: 338)

In contrast to the largely competitive ethos in Anglo societies, a study of young Russian's life expectations (Karpukhin & Kutsenko 1983, cited in Tower et al, op. cit: 334) showed that they placed the creation of friendship networks above job satisfaction, family life and self-fulfillment. A well-known saying in Russian holds that 'I' is the last letter in the alphabet, further evidence of a collective mindset. Supporting the view that Russians respond to a collective logic are narratives gleaned from those who live there: people on the street are quick to point out a by-passer's untied shoelaces or torn plastic grocery bag, flash their headlights in the traffic to warn about nearby police, and suchlike.

As we have seen with Anglo individualism, these elements of a collective mindset have left traces in the language. Mutual readiness to help (*vzaimovyruchka*), for example, implies not just keeping another company (*za kompaniyu*), but also a deep-rooted belief that your friend won't help you tomorrow unless you help him today. Some Russian proverbs illustrate the value of true friendship: *Ne imey sto rubley, a imey sto druzey* (Better a hundred friends than a hundred rubles). Russia is thus considered, by Hofstede and other authorities, as a collective culture *par excellence*.

Russia in the Soviet period

In the context of a discussion of collectivism, it is impossible not to refer briefly to Russia's experiences with Communism, which lasted for most of the last century. Writer Mikhail Shiskin recently claimed

that the Russian revolution, with its rejection of the Tsars' authoritarian social control, represented 'the transition from the supremacy of the collective consciousness to the priority of the individual'. The habits of collectivism, however, have not disappeared; he says, 'a small number of my compatriots are ready for life in a democratic society, but the overwhelming majority still bow before power and accept this patrimonial way of life'.³

Though many commentators have defined it as a failed experiment (Scribner, 2003), for much of the twentieth century, global communism constituted a natural pole around which gathered opposition to the individualistic model of free market capitalism prevalent in the west. In his review of Scribner's *Requiem for Communism* (2003), Kubik discusses the possibility that 'under state socialism workers experienced factory labor in a 'collective' fashion that has been rare and perhaps impossible under capitalism' (Kubik 2007: 131), though Scribner herself admits that collective memory, on many points regarding Soviet times, has been crucially affected by nostalgia:

No worker can afford a nostalgia trip back to the industrial utopia. Today labor must look back to the second world, but not return there. What is needed is the solidarity that flourished in the factory, not the planned economies or environmental destruction, not the disregard for individual livelihood (Scribner, *ibid*: 68)

During Soviet times, there was a well-developed system of community work, and in every group (classes at school, departments at work, etc.) there was a person responsible for sports, education, political information, etc. People performing these tasks were given benefits (free or discounted travel, ability to buy rare goods, a better apartment, etc.).

Something of this community spirit survives today: the power of an isolated individual in Russia is much less than in the west, and most deals are achieved through family, friends and acquaintances. A famous Russian saying is, "One soldier does not make an army". In Russia, it is necessary to know people in power to make things work, another reason why Russians maintain more friendships than an average westerner.

The next section presents the methodology used in the study.

³ Mikhail Shishkin 'Neither NATO nor Ukraine can de-Putinise Russia. We Russians must do it ourselves. Guardian 28 March 2022. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/28/nato-ukraine-vladimir-putin-russia-democratic-national-guilt>, last access 01/04/2022.

Methodology

The poems were selected from public sources, from a British poetry competition with a section for COVID poetry, and from Russian contributions to the poetry collection of a joint Russian American publishing house, “Krik”.⁴ We selected the first 25 examples from each corpus for the purposes of a quantitative comparison. Analysis of the use of pronouns (*I, me, mine, our, ours*) allows us to draw some conclusions concerning the individual/collective orientation of the authors. Following Gardner et al. (1999), we use prevalence of one pronoun group or another as an index of underlying social attitudes. Twenge et al (2013: 408) claim that:

first person plural pronouns (e.g., we, us) are linked to collectivistic cultural stances, whereas first person singular (e.g., I, me) and second person singular (e.g., you, yourself) are linked to individualistic cultural stances.

From these groups we then selected three poems for closer examination, guided by their value in terms of comparing pragmatic, situated meanings in cross-cultural terms: short poems that have some relevance to the individual / collective dimension were selected.

Though linguistics and literary studies are separate disciplines with distinct analytical approaches, tools of strictly linguistic analysis have occasionally been applied to literary topics, with varying results (Carter and Stockwell, 2008). Some convergence may be possible, but while a poem’s aesthetic qualities interest literary criticism, this is not a factor here. The Anglo poems are not by professional poets but by members of the public; the Russian ones are more polished, but both are used as linguistic data, as words on the page that tell us something about how the writers - and, by extension, how *ordinary people* - are feeling during the pandemic.

It has been suggested that national character is best appreciated through poetry:

To bind and interrogate this Proteus, which is usually called national character and which shows itself certainly not less in the writings than in the usages and actions of a nation – that is a high and beautiful philosophy. It is practiced most surely in poetry; for *in the works of imagination and feeling the entire soul of the nation*

⁴ <https://coronaviruspoetry.com/authors/>, last visit 26.06.2022.

reveals itself most freely (Herder, in Berlin and Hardy 2013: 268; our emphasis)

The hypothesis, therefore, is that by analyzing poems produced during lockdown and engaging in cross-cultural comparisons, the traits of national identity that we have outlined so far may be observed.

Our paper explores the data with the linguistic tool of proximisation, developed within Critical Discourse Analysis mainly to highlight instances where media represent threatening situations as closer to the reader, in temporal or spatial terms, than they are. Such threats are linguistically construed mainly through lexico-grammatical choices, as Cap, (2014: 44) explains:

‘traditional’ deictic markers combine with (many) other lexico-grammatical choices to make up coherent structures indexing (rather than ‘deictically’ ‘pointing to’) context in the sense of, at the same time coding and making a response to it.

Even in normal times the ‘other’, especially if they are a stranger or have features that identify them as belonging to an outgroup, may be seen as threatening. In the COVID pandemic, this was greatly exacerbated, especially in 2020, during the first months of uncertainty, when mortality rates soared across the world, and a state of anxiety bordering on panic became a familiar response to situations of social contact.

Cap’s notions of proximisation in mediated representations are applied to effects in the interpersonal discourse spaces that occur in the everyday lives of individuals. The choice of proximisation (Cap 2009, 2014) as a linguistic tool appears appropriate to the climate that prevailed during the pandemic, where perceptions of possible danger, unseen threats and fear of physical contact all skewed the normal sense of the acceptable distance that should be observed between people. It also fits well with the cross-cultural perspective of our study, since its categories map onto the individualistic/collective dimension, in the sense that a preference for greater interpersonal distance is arguably a feature of the former type of country, while lesser distance characterizes the latter group.

The next section presents the results of the quantitative analysis.

PRONOUN USE IN BRITISH AND RUSSIAN COVID POEMS

Table 1 (below) shows results for our survey of 25 poems from the corpora.

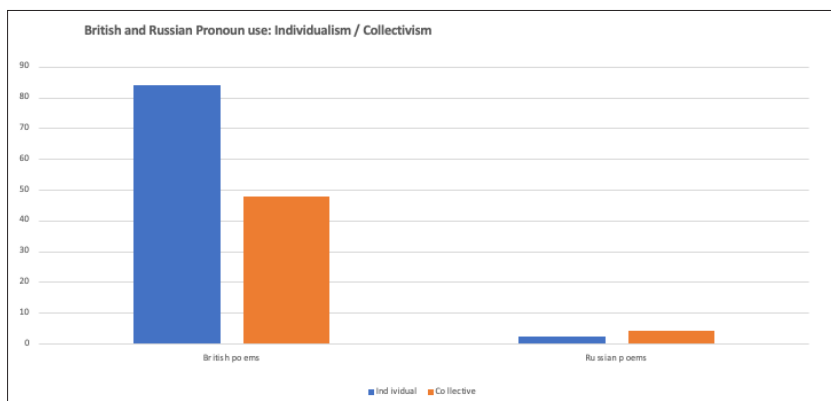


Table One: British and Russian pronoun use

From this it will be seen that the British group returned nearly twice as many individual pronouns (*I, me, my, mine*) as collective (*We, us, our, ours*). Tables with the results for the single poems may be viewed in Appendix A (British data) and B (Russian).

Data (i) Anglo Covid poetry

The poems in this section come from the annual Ledbury festival, which in 2020 proposed a category for Covid-themed poems.⁵ Our interest, both in this group and the Russian poems, was for texts that described thoughts, emotions, experiences engendered by lockdown, especially those connected to the notion of social distance. In figure one (below) and in all the poems, the first column contains the text of the poem, the second notes linguistic effects in the semantic area of fear. These are construed either through lexis from this semantic field (*fear, terror, frightening, shocking, shiver, tremble*, etc.) or via references to factors that might provoke these feelings (*war, contagion, challenge, infection, loss, death*, etc.). It also notes proximation effects, construed through explicit lexical references to distance/closeness (*two meters away, nearby, in the same room, on the other side of the world*) or via implicit means. In the second UK poem, for example, we read of a girl who ‘asked for

⁵ <https://www.poetry-festival.co.uk/lockdown-poems/>, last visit 29.12.2021

his hand’, an indication of a desire for physical proximity. In response, the man ‘blew her a kiss’, which is ambivalent – on the one hand, it indicates a willingness to engage in a relationship, but also recognizes limitations – because of the prevailing social climate, he does not ‘fold her in his arms’, for example.

	Text	Fear, threat / Proximitation
1	Because I could not challenge lockdown;	Lockdown / challenge Shivering
2	It did kindly challenge me.	
3	Does the lockdown make you shiver?	
4	Does it?	
5	I saw the security of my generation destroyed,	Loss of security Mourning Shivering
6	How I mourn the freedom.	
7	Does the loss of freedom make you shiver?	
8	Does it?	
9	Politician’s communicating virtually	Shivering
10	Above all others is the robotism	
11	Does this robotic nature make you shiver?	
12	Does it?	
13	The legal instrument that’s really important	Threat to life Shivering
14	Above everything is the isolating lockdown.	
15	Safety now is essential, safety is lifesaving	
16	Does this make you shiver?	
17	Does it?	

Figure One: *Mentality of lockdown by Edward Parish*

Fear is conveyed through repetition of the lexeme ‘shiver’, in the rhetorical question which occurs in the penultimate line of each quatrain. To shiver is an index of the emotional state of anxiety, fear, panic, even terror. Unlike the explicitly emotional ‘I felt frightened/scared/worried’, it is a bodily sensation, and by this means the writer conveys the intimacy of the feelings, underlining the closeness of the threats described. There are moments where a shift in perspective occurs: in 5), the writer is a detached observer, who ‘sees’ the security of his generation destroyed – something bad is happening to other people and he is watching it from a distance. In 6) this now involves him directly, and he mourns his own ‘loss of freedom’. Again, in lines 9-12, the notion of politicians behaving ‘robotically’ construes a kind of distance; their communication is only

‘virtual’, it reaches us from a great distance through media. However, their actions and decisions have the capacity to directly affect our lives, so the threat associated with their robotic behavior comes suddenly close and becomes another factor that potentially makes the writer and his reader’s ‘shiver’.

	Text	Fear, threat / Proximitisation
1	On a one walk day	
2	she knelt two meters away	Two meters away
3	and asked for his hand.	Asked for his hand
4	He buried his head	
5	in the crook of his elbow	
6	and blew her a kiss.	Blew a kiss
7	She coughed up champagne,	Coughed up
8	which cooled his brow, while choosing	His (hot) brow
9	their favorite songs.	
10	The iPod broke down	
11	at a service attended	
12	by virtual friends.	Virtual friends

Figure two: On a one walk day by Simon Tindale

In the poem ‘On a one walk day’ (figure 2, above) ordinary pre-pandemic social conventions are subverted, and the notion of social distance accounts for what has changed. A couple are walking together but must stay ‘two meters away’ from each other (2). Their intimate relations are clear from the fact that she asks him to marry her (3). The man replies by blowing a kiss (6) but protects the girl from contagion by covering his mouth as he does so (4-5). The temporal and spatial horizons of this poem, then, are fraught with danger: it is a ‘one walk day’ because the government has rationed outdoor activity to combat the virus. The fact that two lovers take such precautions on an occasion which would normally occur in much greater physical proximity underlines their awareness of the risks. The threat of the virus makes a covert appearance in the descriptions of the wedding, where the bride ‘coughs up’ champagne

(7), a lexical choice that recalls hospital patients with infected lungs, and the groom has a fevered brow in need of cooling (8), again language reminiscent of the semantic domain of illness. The potential for fatality of the unspecified threat is hinted at by a lexical choice descriptive of the man's covering his mouth: 'he buried his head' (4). The sense of distance between the protagonists, construed in the first two quatrains, is underlined in the final line, where the guests are shown following from their homes via an internet connection at a great, and 'safe', distance. The poem's overall vision is thus of a world where physical contact is off limits, where situations in which a certain amount of physical intimacy would normally occur (a proposal, a wedding) become fraught with an imminent threat that redraws social expectations in this area.

	Text	Fear, threat / Proximation
1	Suddenly the world is on hold	
2	Is it rearranging or disintegrating?	Alteration / disintegration
3	I have shut out the world	The world shut out
4	Cannot see my family	Family are far away
5	Touch them or be with them.	
6	This new world is strange	
7	This new life is something I cannot	
8	understand or get used to	
9	Suddenly it's a new way of life	
10	Only to go out to the shop	Two meters apart
11	Two meter apart	
12	Oh what have we come to	Virus with us
13	Is this virus with us for a while	
14	Hope it goes soon I don't like rules	
15	My mental state is not right	Fear
16	I now fear I cannot think clear	Being hit; surviving
17	Will this virus hit me or will I survive?	Touch..loss of control
18	Everything I touch I feel out of control	
19	Is nature trying to tell us something?	
20	To leave well alone	Change / disintegration
20	Earth is rearranging to stop it disintegrating.	

Figure three: Lockdown by Jennifer Boit

The threat in 'Lockdown' (figure 3, above) is originally framed as associated with a macro, supra-social dimension, construed throughout the text via lexis suggestive of large, impersonal phenomena: *the world* (1-3), *this new world* (6), *nature* (18), *Earth* (20). The rather unfocused, possibly distant threat associated with a 'disintegrating' world (1) rapidly comes closer as the writer describes her reclusive state of existence:

I have shut out the world

Cannot see my family

Touch them or be with them (3-5)

That normal social distances have been disrupted is plain from the writer's complaint about the need to observe a 'two meters' distance while shopping (10). The writer gives a name to the threat ('this virus' 12) and specifies its potential for fatal harm: the virus is represented in a metaphor comparing its action to that of a missile, or an aggressor ('will this virus hit me?' 16) invading personal space. Meanwhile the writer's sense of touch has been affected by the state of fear she now lives in, and she laments her loss of control over nearby objects (17). In a final return to a macro perspective, the writer suggests that the crisis itself has been provoked by too much closeness; man is being warned by nature to 'leave well alone' (19), i.e., to observe safe distances both when dealing with ecological factors and with other people.

Data (ii) Russian Covid poetry

The poems come from the virtual anthology of international and Russian Covid poetry compiled by Gennady and Rika Katsov, in response to the pandemic. The original Russian texts can be viewed in Appendix C.

1	I hunker down at home as in a trench ,	
2	The fate is relentless and capricious.	
3	Coronavirus is roaming Europe,	Fear of Covid
4	Elusive as a specter of communism.	roaming Europe
5	Comforting words are in vain.	
6	It's impossible to break the vicious circle.	
7	People dash aside at seeing each other in deserted streets.	vicious circle
8	The quarantine, having closed borders,	
9	Brought the communication between people to an end.	dash aside – avoidance closed borders
10	And everyone is dying by himself,	
11	Being left alone to confront the scourge.	
12	Don't nourish false hopes for friendly bonds with neighbors.	the scourge
13	Russia as well as China are helping Italy – an EU member.	Bonds with neighbors
14	And snobby capitals don't understand	
15	That death hangs over everyone	death hangs over everyone
16	And they'd better unite in the face of the beginning World War III	World War III

Figure four. Poem 1, Alexander Gorodnitsky

Poem 1 (figure 4, above) subverts Russia's supposedly collective, other-oriented traditions, as the writer repeatedly emphasizes an individual dimension to the experience. To begin with he 'hunkers down at home' (1), people 'dash aside' on seeing each other (7), streets are 'deserted' (7), and everyone dies 'by himself' (10), 'left alone' (11). We are warned against hoping for 'friendly bonds' with neighbors (12). The threat, 'coronavirus' (3) is represented as 'roaming Europe', which might be thought of as distant - it is not roaming Russia - but the threat is elusive (4) and it is clearly affecting daily life in Russia itself, as the details already noted make clear. Moreover, the virus is conflated with the 'specter of Communism', itself a source of fear in some quarters. In this poem, however, what is truly elusive is the upside of communism, its capacity for providing a collective ideology that might unite people in the face of such a deadly threat. What remains are scattered images that show people breaking

apart in fear of one another (7), being left to die alone (10), to confront their personal terror (11), in a world of closed borders (8) where even communication between people, let alone solidarity with them, is at an end (9). An imminent threat of death ‘hangs over everyone’ (15), and the writer ends with a sudden warning that an even worse threat than Coronavirus is in wait, World War III (16). International unity, solidarity, a sense of collectivism at a macro level, are therefore desperately called for – without a great deal of optimism – at the close of the poem.

	Text	Fear, threat / Proximation
1	The war is on but in a strange way.	War Death enters Poison The devil
2	Everything is deceptively silent.	
3	Should you hear a waltz by Khachaturian, you are sure to get sad.	
4	Having put on ridiculous masks, the whole world is unhappy with its destiny.	
5	It is by someone’s devilish command drawn in a sad masquerade.	
6	Science is unable to help us.	
7	Just sit and wait in your corner until death, like in a ball,	
8	Entering without knocking extends poison.	
9	It’s painful for me to hear this news, sad and mourning.	
10	I don’t know if there is a God, but the devil is sure to exist.	

Figure five: Poem 2, Masquerade by Alexander Gorodnitsky

The Covid measures, especially the wearing of face masks, feature in the extended metaphor developed in Masquerade (figure 5, above), which compares life under the new social measures to a sort of fancy dress ball where sadness, not joy, is produced by the music (3-4). The threat is conveyed from the outset – ‘the war is on’ (1), and in this context the ‘ridiculous’ masks evoke the idea not of carnival costumes but rather gas masks. Thus, what should be a convivial social occasion becomes a ‘sad masquerade’ (6), where instead of dancing you sit and wait ‘in your corner’ (8) until ‘death’, personified as a waiter, enters without knocking and hands you, instead of alcohol, a cup of ‘poison’ (9).

	Text	Fear, threat / Proximation
1	At first coronavirus has roamed here like a heffalump,	Coronavirus..a heffalump On his trail
2	Then I got out to the pharmacy literally on his trail.	Garlic
3	Since we are all humans, we are a bit nervous.	
4	I went to the pharmacy with a bunch of garlic on my chest.	Ambush everywhere.. doom and gloom
5	I am non-athletic and kept to my bed all my childhood	
6	Although I chewed nasty ginger and rubbed my hands with hand sanitizer.	
7	Wherever I see, there is ambush everywhere, all doom and gloom.	
8	The pharmacist will ask me: "What do you want?"	
9	But I don't need anything.	
10	There is no hope, love or faith, no vaccines, medicines or potions.	
11	Streets and squares are deserted,	
12	Police officers carry the guard of honor at the stalls	

Figure six, Poem 3, Vadim Yampolsky

There is an ironic tone throughout Poem 3 (figure 6, above): the author jokes about going to the pharmacy 'with a bunch of garlic on my chest' as if the unseen threat, Covid, was a vampire (4), and appears to mock his own sanitary practices - chewing 'nasty ginger' and rubbing hands with hand sanitizer are seen as equally ineffective (6-7). The opening line presents coronavirus as a 'heffalump', an imaginary animal that figures in A.A. Milne's stories of Winnie the Pooh. In the episode in question, Pooh and Piglet set out to catch the heffalump by building a pit but fall into it and cannot get out. To wile away the time they tell each other stories about the terrible beast and build its threat up to tremendous proportions. The author suggests that we have done something similar with Covid though, unlike the heffalump, the rest of

the poem reveals that the threat from Covid is apparently real. Streets and squares are deserted (12), and the pharmacy is unable to sell ‘hope, love, faith, vaccines, medicines, potions’ (11) that would be able to remedy the situation.

Findings across the two groups of poems will be presented in the next section.

Discussion

The two groups of poems are now compared, from the perspective of the individual/collective dimension. Based on what was said above, we might hypothesize that the Anglo poems will tend to show the former quality more strongly than the latter, and vice versa for the Russian group. All three of the UK poems do check up in this sense. In the first, for example, the poet uses the first-person singular pronoun to anchor the poem in his own subjectivity; the opening frames the pandemic itself as a personal challenge to this one individual, rather than a social catastrophe:

Because I could not challenge lockdown;

It did kindly challenge me.

The second poem, too, focuses exclusively on the experiences of two individuals; ‘he’ and ‘she’, whose dramatic, ironic actions appear to satirize government precautions and the gravity of the moment. The only references to the tragic events playing out are implicit (readers know why she is kneeling two meters away, and why only ‘virtual’ friends attend the wedding). The fact that she ‘coughs up’ champagne is another implicit suggestion that the writer is aware of the awful backdrop, but once more underlines that the perspective is comic. What matters in this poem is the couple’s experience, and they claim the right of all wedding couples to hilarious memories of their special day, whatever is going on in the world outside.

The individualistic perspective dominates the third poem, once more mainly construed via the singular pronoun ‘I’. The poem reads as an incoherent outburst of subjectivity, the writer seemingly desperate to articulate her own response to the changed social circumstances: *I have shut out the world / this new life is something I cannot understand / I don’t like rules / I now fear I cannot think clear / will I survive? / I feel out of control*. However, there is also a sense that the writer expects that this individual experience will be shared by others; she uses plural

pronouns too (what have we come to?, is this virus with us for a while? Is nature trying to tell us something?). Something similar occurs in the first poem, as the writer consistently uses his own experiences to reach out, via rhetorical questions, to readers:

Does the loss of freedom make you shiver?

Does it?

These three poems then, in different ways, suggest an individualistic perspective that is not entirely without an awareness that other subjectivities exist, nor are they exclusively focused on individual ends.

Turning to the Russian poems, the first opens with a first-person reference that might lead us to think we are in similar territory:

I hunker down at home as in a trench

However, this is the only use of ‘I’ in the poem, which immediately takes on a broader perspective. The writer talks of ‘the fate’ (not ‘my fate’), and then pans out to a medium shot:

Coronavirus is roaming Europe,

Elusive as a specter of communism.

There is a focus on general, sociological features rather than on personal experience, the meanings carried by plural nouns (*people, everyone*):

The quarantine, having closed borders,

Brought the communication between people to an end

And everyone is dying by himself

The second Russian poem, like the second British one, has a light-hearted, satirical tone. An extended metaphor, a masked ball, is used to convey the new social circumstances where what is familiar feels subtly, confusingly, different:

The war is on but in a strange way.

Everything is deceptively silent.

However, where the British poem focused on the experiences of a couple in the pandemic, this poem, like the first Russian poem, is interested not in the experience of the individual, but rather in what is going on at a broader, social level. He says that ‘the whole world is unhappy with its

destiny’, ‘science is unable to help us’, evokes an image of a crowded ball, a waltz by Khachaturian, and so on. As in some medieval painting, the ubiquitous threat of death is the point – someone will come in sooner or later and offer you a cup of poison. A subjective perspective enters at the end, as the writer says how ‘painful’ the situation is, for him; however, his suffering is not motivated by self-pity alone, but clearly relates to the general situation.

The third Russian poem is also ironic, self-mocking. Here the first-person pronoun is used consistently as the writer talks of a trip to the pharmacy, gives details of his childhood and personal habits. First person perceptions and feelings are important:

Wherever I see, there is ambush everywhere, all doom and gloom.

This poem feels closest to the mood of the Anglo ones, as the writer’s interest appears to be on his own experiences (*I don’t need anything*), though this is tempered by statements like ‘we are all humans’, and references to common experiences ‘we are all a bit nervous’. Something of a broader perspective is also recovered at the end:

There is no hope, love or faith, no vaccines, medicines or potions.

Streets and squares are deserted,

Police officers carry the guard of honor at the stalls.

To sum up, the Russian poems do appear to have a more collective focus than the British ones. They attempt to convey what is passing at a social level, to view the pandemic from a variety of angles that includes the collective. By contrast, the individualistic note appears more characteristic of the Anglo productions.

CONCLUSION

Based on such limited data, any conclusions in terms of the intercultural issues set out above must be careful to avoid unreasonable generalizations. It is not the intention to ‘prove’, for example, that Russian society is more ‘collective’ than British, or that individualism is more a feature of British society. Rather than suggest that this study can confirm Hofstede’s intercultural research, the heuristic value of the poems as cultural artefacts is hopefully demonstrated, as well as the usefulness of this analytical methodology. The study may be seen as tentative work in progress, offering outlines towards a more ambitious project

that could involve a more principled exploration of the individualistic/collective paradigm, applied to these two countries with their vastly differing cultures.

The study has shown a tendency for UK poems to feature a personal, subjective perspective, rather than a collective one. These poems, however, are not without features of other-orientation, sympathy, care, compassion, social awareness. Likewise, the Russian poems, which tend to embrace collective positions, also find space for subjective elements. The study has hopefully shown the relevance of background cultural notions such as those of Hofstede, Wierzbicka and Larina, both in explicating the linguistic effects of single lexical items, and in achieving a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings that the poems display.

In a time where a heavily mediated, global public health crisis foregrounded the semantic field of *fear*, the study has shed light on the way people in Russia and the UK conceptualized, and hence to some extent dealt with, this unprecedented situation of existential threat.

REFERENCES

- Belyaeva, Liubov, A. 2018. Social Distances as a Feature of the Contemporary Russian Social Space. *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 18 1, 58–72.
- Berlin, Isaiah, and Hardy, Henry. 2013. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Second Edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Breton, André and Polizzotti, Mark, eds. 1997. *Anthology of Black Humor*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Callaghan, John, and Ben Harker. 2011. *British Communism: A Documentary History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cap, Piotr. 2009. *Legitimation in Political Discourse: A Cross-disciplinary Perspective on the Modern US War Rhetoric*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Cap, Piotr. 2014. “Expanding CDS methodology by cognitive-pragmatic tools: Proximation theory and public space discourses”. In *Contemporary Critical Discourse Studies*, eds Hart, Christopher, and Piotr Cap, 189-211. London: Bloomsbury.
- Carter, Ronald, and Peter Stockwell. 2008. *The Language and Literature Reader*. London: Routledge.

Gardner, Wendi, L., Shira Gabriel and Angela, Y. Lee. 1999. "I" Value Freedom, but "We" Value Relationships: Self-Construal Priming Mirrors Cultural Differences in Judgment". *Psychological Science* 10(4), 321–326.

Hofstede, Geert. 2001. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Hofstede, Geert, Gert Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. 2010. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Inkeles, Alex and Daniel J. Levinson. 1954. "National Character: The Study of Modal Personality and Sociocultural Systems." In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Gardiner Lindzey, 977-1020. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley.

Karpukhin, O and V. Kutsenko. 1983. *Student Segodnia-Specialist Zavtra*. Moscow: Molodaia Guardiia.

Konrad Koerner, Ernst, F. 1992. "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: A Preliminary History and a Bibliographical Essay". *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2(2): 173-198.

Kubik, Jan. 2007. "Historical Memory and the End of Communism". *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9(2), 127–33.

Larina, Tatiana. 2015. "Culture-specific Communicative Styles as a Framework for Interpreting Linguistic and Cultural Idiosyncrasies". *International Review of Pragmatics*. Online at: https://brill.com/view/journals/irp/7/2/article-p195_3.xml.

Lone, Shabir, Ahmad. 2020. "COVID-19 Pandemic – an African Perspective". *Emerging Microbes and Infections* 9(1): 1300–1308.

Mace, C. A. 1943. "National Stereotypes—Their Nature and Function". *The Sociological Review* 1(2), 29–36.

Mullen, Carol, A., Eugenie A. Samier, Sue Brindley, Fenwick W. English and Nora K. Carr. 2013. "An Epistemic Frame Analysis of Neoliberal Culture and Politics in the US, UK, and the UAE". *Interchange* 43(3), 187–228.

Nicholls, John, G. 1989. *Competitive Ethos and Democratic Education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Peabody, Dean. 1985. *National Characteristics*. Cambridge, New York and Paris: Cambridge University Press.

- Schneider, David, J. 2004. *The Psychology of Stereotyping*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Scribner, Charity. 2003. *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Tower, Rupert, K., Caroline Kelly, and Anne Richards. 1997. "Individualism, Collectivism and Reward Allocation: A Cross-cultural Study in Russia and Britain". *British Journal of Social Psychology* 36(3), 331–45.
- Twenge, Jean, M. 2014. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are more Confident, Assertive, Entitled-and more Miserable than Ever Before*. New York: Atria Paperback.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1991. *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2002. Russian Cultural Scripts: The Theory of Cultural Scripts and its Applications. *Ethos* 30(4), 401–32.

Appendix A

English Covid poems

Title / Author	Individual (I, me, my, mine)	Collective (We, us, our, ours)
Untitled by Sakshi Shinde	5	0
Mentality of lockdown by Edward Parish	5	0
Haiku: Schools Closed by Connor Parish	0	0
Lockdown by Jennifer Boit	11	3
Oh Corona! by Shagun Jain	0	4
Lockdown Parents by Sarah Smith	12	1
Hope by Clive Grewcock	4	0
Internet searches during lockdown by Emma Mason	10	1
Grieved in Absence by Ermira Mitre	0	0
Meditations on the Spring Lockdown by Ermira Mitre	0	6
One Day Soon by Alison Lovett	0	4
Lockdown Universe by Brenda Cox	1	2
Viral by Rich Hammond	1	0

House Arrest by Jeanette Plumb	0	0
Joseph's Hug by Elizabeth Whitaker	3	1
ZoomDoom by Carolyn Brookes	9	0
We said Goodbye by Angela Fendley	0	3
Cummings and Goings by Sarah Miles	0	5
The Medic by Fatemeh Moussavi	14	0
It's My Cage – OK by Ian Rabjohns	7	0
This Dance by Dagmar Seeland	0	7
Perfect Storm by Ilse Pedler	0	0
The New Normal by Kelly Hunter	0	5
The Virus by Angela Nix	0	6
What I've learned from lockdown by Michael Field	2	0
Total	84	48

Appendix B: Russian Covid poems

Title / Author	Individual (I, me, my, mine)	Collective (We, us, our, ours)
Spring of a student by Alexey Ostudin/ А.Остудин Весна студента / Vesna studenta	0	3
Masquerade by Alexander / А.Городницкий Маскарад/ Maskarad	1	1
Pure rhetoric by Andrey Polonsky/ А.Полонский Чистая риторика/ Chistaya ritorika	0	4
Comrade bird, where are you from? by Alexey Alexandrov /А.Александров Товарищ птица, вы откуда? /Tovarishch ptitsa, vy otkuda?	0	2
Nature takes revenge on us for Michurin by Alexey Alexandrov /А.Александров Природа мстит нам за Мичурина /Priroda mstit nam za Michurina	0	4
Get well soon, Planet! by Olga Andreeva/ О.Андреева Выздоровливай, планета / Vyzdoravlivay, planeta	0	7

REINTERPRETATION OF RUSSIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Quarantine selfie by Evgeny Vezhlyan/ Е.Вежлян Карантинное селфи /Karantinnoye selfi	4	8
I am a microbiologist by life by Herman Vinogradov/ Г.Виноградов По жизни я микробиолог / По zhizni ya mikrobiolog	3	1
Don't get used without me by Tatyana Voltskaya/ Т.Вольтская Ты без меня не привыкай /Ty bez menya ne privyukai	2	4
We know what is good by Anna Gerasimova/ А.Герасимова Мы знаем что такое хорошо / My znauem chto takoye khorosho	1	7
Quarantine by Alexander Gorodnitsky/ А.Городницкий Карантин/ Karantin	2	3
Doing nothing by Dmitry Danilov/ Д.Данилов Ничего не делать / Nichego ne delat'	1	7
Quarantine will end by Andrey Dmitriyev /А.Дмитриев Закончится карантин / Zakonchitsya karantin	0	3
I am afraid for Verona's citizens by Veronika Dolina/О.Андреева Боюсь за жителей Вероны/ Boyus' za zHITEley Verony	1	2
And so, we'll live remotely by Olga Andreeva/ О.Андреева Так и проживем дистанционно/ Tak i prozhivem distantsionno	1	2
Creaking hinges by Herman Vlasov / Г.Власов Скрип петель/ Skrip petel'	0	2
For all of us by Veronika Dolina / В.Долина Для всех для нас / Dlya vsekh dlya nas	0	5

So as a community we sit in the quarantine by Victor Yesipov / В.Есипов Вот так всем кагалом сидим в карантине/ Vot tak vsem kagalom sidim v karantine	1	2
People and animals by Vadim Zhuk/ В.Жук Люди и звери / Lyudi i zveri	0	3
During a week of coronavirus by Marina Kudimova / М.Кудимова На мировой коронавирусной неделе / Na mirovoyu koronavirusnoy nedele	0	4
The virus poem by Marina Kudimova / М.Кудимова Вирусное / Virusnoye	0	3
Today is Saturday's Friday by Aleksander Lavrin / А.Лаврин Сегодня пятница субботы / Segodnya pyatnitsa subboty	0	7
So, the tram is on the rails by Evgeny Lesin/ Е.Лесин Вот трамвай на рельсы встал / Vot tramvay na rel'sy vstal	4	7
At first coronavirus walked here as the Heffalump by Vadim Yampolsky /В.Ямпольский Сначала здесь коронавирус прошёлся, как слонопотам /Snachala zdes' koronavirus prosholsya, kak slonopotam	4	1
When else are we going to sit with dignity like this by Tatyana Voltskaya /Т. Вольтская Когда еще так важно посидим/ Kogda yeshche tak vazhno posidim	1	3
Total	26	95

Appendix C: Original Russian poem texts

<p>Poem 1</p> <p>В своём доме сижу я, как в окопе. Судьба неумолима и капризна. Коронавирус бродит по Европе, Неуловим, как призрак коммунизма. Напрасны утешительные речи. Не разорвать губительного круга. На опустевших улицах, при встрече, Шарахаются люди друг от друга. На общности людей поставил точку Границы перекрывший карантин, И каждый умирает в одиночку, С бедой один оставшись на один. С соседями на дружеские узы Надежду понапрасну не питай, – Италии, стране Евросоюза, Россия помогает и Китай. И не поймут чванливые столицы, Что смерть висит над каждой головой, И надо бы нам всем объединиться, Ввиду начала Третьей Мировой. (А.Городницкий)</p>	<p>V svoynom domu sizhu ya, kak v okope. Sud'ba neumolima i kaprizna. Koronavirus brodit po Yevrope, Neulovim, kak prizrak kommunizma. Naprasny uteshitel'nyye rechi. Ne razorvat' gubitel'nogo kruga. Na opustevshikh ulitsakh, pri vstreche, Sharakhayutsya lyudi drug ot druga. Na obshchnosti lyudey postavil tochku Granitsy perekryvshiy karantin, I kazhdyy umirayet v odinochku, S bedoy odin ostavshis' na odin. S sosedyami na druzheskiye uzy Nadezhdu ponaprasnu ne pitay, – Italii, strane Yevrosoyuza, Rossiya pomogayet i Kitay. I ne poymut chvanlivyye stolitsy, Chto smert' visit nad kazhdoy golovoy, I nado by nam vsem ob'yedinit'sya, Vvidu nachala Tret'yey Mirovoy.</p>
--	---

<p>Поem 2</p> <p>МАСКАРАД</p> <p>Идёт война, но как-то странно. Вокруг обманчивая тишь. Услышишь вальс Хачатуряна И поневоле загрустишь. Дурацкие напялив маски, Весь мир, судьбе своей не рад, По чьей-то дьявольской указке, В печальный втянут маскарад. Помочь не может нам наука. Сиди и жди в своём углу, Где смерть тебе, войдя без стука, Протянет яд, как на балу. Мне горько слушать сводки эти, – Скупую траурную весть. Не знаю, есть ли Бог на Свете, Но дьявол, вероятно, есть.</p> <p>(А.Городницкий)</p>	<p>MASKARAD</p> <p>Idyot voyna, no kak-to stranno. Vokrug obmanchivaya tish'. Uslyshish' val's Khachaturyana I ponevole zagrustish'. Duratskiye napyaliv maski, Ves' mir, sud'be svozey ne rad, Po ch'yey-to d'yavol'skoy ukazke, V pechal'nyy vtyanut maskarad. Pomoch' ne mozhet nam nauka. Sidi i zhdi v svoynom uglu, Gde smert' tebe, voydya bez stuka, Protyanet yad, kak na balu. Mne gor'ko slushat' svodki eti, – Skupuyu traurnuyu vest'. Ne znayu, yest' li Bog na Svete, No d'yavol, veroyatno, yest'.</p>
--	--

<p>Поem 3</p> <p>Сначала здесь коронавирус прошёлся, как слонопотам, потом и я в аптеку вылез буквально по его следам.</p> <p>Поскольку все мы, человеки, слабы нервишками слегка – я шёл до названной аптеки, надев вязанку чеснока.</p> <p>Я, прямо скажем, неспортивный, все детство чем-нибудь хворал, хотя жевал имбирь противный и спиртом руки протирал.</p> <p>Куда ни кинь – кругом засада, тоски зелёной торжество... Провизор спросит: «что вам надо?». А мне не надо ничего.</p> <p>Надежды нет, любви и веры, вакцин, таблеток и микстур. Пустынны улицы и скверы, и у ларьков карабинеры несут почётный караул.</p> <p>(В.Ямпольский)</p>	<p>Snachala zdes' koronavirus prosholsya, kak slonopotam, potom i ya v apteku vylez bukval'no po yego sledam.</p> <p>Poskol'ku vse my, cheloveki, slaby nervishkami slegka – ya shol do nazvannoy apteki, nadev vyazanku chesnoka.</p> <p>YA, pryamo skazhem, nesportivnyy, vse detstvo chem-nibud' khvorol, khotya zheval imbir' protivnyy i spirtom ruki protiral.</p> <p>Kuda ni kin' – krugom zasada, toski zelonoy torzhestvo... Provizor sprosit: «chto vam nado?». A mne ne nado nichego.</p> <p>Nadezhdy net, lyubvi i very, vaktsin, tabletok i mikstur. Pustynny ulitsy i skvery, i u lar'kov karabinery nesut pochotnyy karaul.</p>
---	--

Даглас Марк Понтон

Универзитет у Катањи, Катања, Италија

Дилјара Давелтишина

Институт за међународне односе, Москва, Русија

ИНДИВИДУАЛИЗАМ И КОЛЕКТИВИЗАМ: ИНТЕРКУЛТУРАЛНЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ БРИТАНСКЕ И РУСКЕ COVID ПОЕЗИЈЕ

Апстракт: Велика Британија и Русија посматрају се у светлу различитих националних обележја у погледу индикатора индивидуалистичког vs. колективистичког приступа животу, и наш рад разматра културне факторе који су укључени у начине појмовне артикулације, као и проживљена искуства lockdown-а. Криза COVID 19 је, заправо, у већини земаља била праћена друштвеним мерама које су ускратиле оно што се дуго сматрало фунаменталним слободама, и ово је узроковало поновно појављивање старих контроверзи о природи личне слободе, демократији спрам државне контроле, праву на здравство, расподелу богатства и сл. Истражујемо поезију која се стварала у два друштвена контекста током lockdown-а, како су људи одговарали на драматичне околности, окрећући се поезији како би исказали лична осећања. Поеме нису анализирани према критеријумима литерарних заслуга, напротив, истражују се из перспективе лингвистичке теорије приближавања са интеркултурног становишта. Промислићемо питање да ли се претпостављени „колективистички“ начин размисљања Русије уочава у овим текстовима, спрам „индивидуалистичког“

одговора у англосаксонском контексту тј. да ли такве генерализације, чак стереотипи, имају било какво значење у кризи каква је она узрокована вирусом COVID.

Кључне речи: COVID 19, Русија, поезија, приближавање, интеркултуралност, индивидуализам, колективизам.