



## Linguistic Comparison of Russian and Chinese Kinship Terms in the Context of Language and Culture

Andrew J. Han

Student at Jericho High School, Jericho, NY, USA

**\*Corresponding Author:** Andrew J. Han, Student at Jericho High School, Jericho, NY, USA

**Abstract:** Language is the unique communication ability of human beings and the best footnote of why human beings are human beings. It builds people's understanding of the world, and at the same time affects people's expression and thinking patterns with its own structure. Under the statement that one language is one worldview, through the comparison of the relative term systems of Russian and Chinese, the similarities and differences between Russian and Chinese cultures are explored from the perspective of language world picture. From the systematic evolution of kinship terms, the comparison of the expression of consanguinity, and the comparison of the expression of in-laws, it is found that Russian and Chinese reflect certain cultural differences in the structural evolution and expression of the kinship appellation system.

**Keywords:** Comparison between Russian and Chinese, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Linguistic culture, Relative terms

### 1. LANGUAGE AND THINKING

The concept of the relationship between language and thinking has always been the focus of many linguists, philosophers, and experts in the fields of cognitive scientists and brain scientists. From the moment humans were born, we have looked at the world curiously and explored this completely unknown world with various senses. Therefore, the process of human language acquisition is by no means simply "learning a language" and "using it to communicate." Instead, language is used as a window to understand the world. Through the key of language, people can understand the world and show their thoughts to the world. So, what is the relationship between language and thinking? From what perspectives should we explain this problem like "the chicken lays the egg, the egg lays the chicken?"

When we look back at the definition of language itself, we will find that there are many definitions of language. The definitions from different perspectives reflect that language, as a unique communication method for human beings, plays an indispensable role in human society, life, communication and interaction. Languages from different perspectives also help people realize their thinking to a certain extent, and people are also dominated by their own language patterns or habits in the construction of thinking. Therefore, the famous linguist Humboldt proposed a argument that "a language represents a worldview." [1]

The present-day word "language" probably derives from Proto-Indo-European "\*dnǵʰwéh₂s" (tongue, speaking, language), Latin "lingua (tongue, language)" or old French "language." [2] Regardless of the source, language, as the main way of our daily communication, is mainly produced through pronunciation organs such as the tongue, and is presented in human life in the form of sound or text. Thus, human language has been given a rather special place from the very beginning.

Compared with animals, the communication of human language enables indirect transmission without presence, and due to the arbitrary combination of speech forms and symbols in human language. Human beings can use limited elements to produce infinite discourse, and make new words or sentences without limit of quantity. However, because the communication system of animals is relatively closed, and various rules cannot be arranged and combined in more differentiated forms, the thoughts that can be expressed are often very limited. For example: some studies have shown that the chestnut-crested babbler and the spotted thrush in Australia can use two different calls to distinguish

different information, but this method can only express limited information, and the transmission process is also prone to lack of clear expression and loss of information (for example, if the pronunciation form of "low-high" cannot be distinguished by pitch due to damage to the articulator, when only the sound pattern of "low-low" can be produced, communication will fail)[3][ 4]. In addition, bees that use dancing as a means of communication will also indicate the distance and orientation of food through the speed of swaying and the angle between the path of dancing and the sun's rays [5]. Although bees, a highly dependent group-dependent species, also show a certain degree of sociality, and have developed a unique communication method because their survival depends on cooperation. Although they can express the location of food more accurately, the information they transmit is limited to representations of food locations, compared to human language, are still relatively limited. And this kind of dance must be transmitted in the way of "presence". Once the object of communication is not within the visible range of the dance, the information cannot be transmitted.

Some animals have also been proved to be able to acquire some simple forms of communication through certain social learning. For example, a bonobo named Kanzi once learned to express his wishes with a set of Yerkes sign language. It shows that some animals are indeed smart enough to master certain symbols and gestures and communicate with humans, but whether it is the number of symbols they master or the extraction of rules, the performance of chimpanzees is only equivalent to that of human children around four years old. [6] What's more, the most subtle part of human language is that in addition to the arrangement and combination of symbols, human language also has crucial rules. From pronunciation, vocabulary to sentences, chapters and even our writing system, the rules of human language restrict the use of this set of symbols in a grammatical way, ensuring that this set of systems can always be used effectively to convey messages. For example, the part of speech, grammatical category, and word order in human language all determine the way people should use this set of symbol systems. Taking English as an example, the selection of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, the collocation of verbs and subjects, and the choice of tense when making sentences all affect our use of symbols. Through the addition of grammatical rules, people can create unlimited sentences to express subtle, complex thoughts.

Therefore, from the uniqueness of human language, linguists have broken the misconception we established in middle school: language is a social learning behavior, not instinct. In fact, the relationship between language and thinking is as mentioned in Stephen Pinker's book *Language Instinct*:

Language is a unique building block in the organization of the human brain. Language is a complex and specialized skill that a person acquires in childhood, without learning or formal instruction. People can use language freely without having to understand the logic and principles behind it, and everyone's level is roughly the same without qualitative difference, which is obviously different from other common information processing or intelligent operation abilities.

That's why some cognitive scientists describe language as a "psychological faculty," but I prefer the quaint word: "instinct." What it conveys is that humans know how to talk, just as spiders know how to spin webs.

The fact that spiders know how to draw and weave webs is not the invention of some unknown genius spider, nor is it the result of careful teaching or some kind of architectural talent. In fact, the reason why spiders make webs is that the brains they possess endow them with the urge and ability to make webs.

From a scientific point of view, the sophisticated and complex language ability is a biological attribute that we are born with, and it does not originate from the teaching of our parents or the cultivation of schools. As Wilde said: "Education is an enviable thing. But always remember: nothing worth knowing can be taught."

A preschooler's tacit grammatical knowledge is far more complex than the thickest writing guide or the most advanced computerized language system [7].

In other words, although a specific language needs to be acquired in a specific human community, the language ability and its logical ability are our innate instinctive behaviors. Therefore, rather than saying that language is a tool consciously "invented" by human beings, it is better to say that language

is the best communication method “developed” by human instinct. Through language, we can express more abstract concepts. Philosophy, literature and art, and literature all rely on exquisite and meticulous language expression.

Although there are many ways of thinking, such as pictorial thinking and numerical thinking, language is still the most habitual and frequently used by human beings. Although language does not determine thinking, it does not mean that language will not affect thinking. As an important part of the cultural framework, language also subtly affects different language users. People of different nations, countries, and cities use different languages and acquire different grammatical rules. This has also led to many linguists learning come to the conclusion that “a language represents a worldview.”

## 2. LINGUISTICS AND CULTURES

As a part of culture, language inevitably affects users with its own rules, but it also reflects users' habits and ways of viewing the world. The Chinese and Russian languages discussed in this article are very different in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The Russian language, which belongs to the Slavic language family of the Indo-European language family, naturally has rich grammatical categories and different morphological marks in terms of word type which presents different semantic. This also makes many Chinese who learn Russian have to spend more time getting used to Russian expressions. Under the grammatical framework of Russian, everything we say and think is based on verb collocations and category marks under grammar as key considerations in language organization. However, language is the key to our understanding of a country. In addition to mastering the correct grammatical rules, we also need to use the country's cultural customs as the background to be able to use vocabulary more accurately and make better expressions. Therefore, the Russian scholar М.В. Симеонова once said: “When learning a language, we should also pay attention to the study of culture.” [8]Therefore, this article combines language and culture, hoping to break away from the shackles of literal semantics and realize М.В. Симеонова's for language learner expectations.

Linguistic culture has always been a subject that cannot be ignored in comparative linguistics. As a subject that studies the relationship and function between language and culture, how to enhance the understanding between different language users, make communication smoother, and understand different national cultures. A deeper understanding has become an important task of linguistic and cultural studies. Especially living in today's society with advanced technology and fast information transmission, cross-domain communication between people has become a necessary normality. In order to avoid cognitive differences or communication barriers caused by factors such as national conditions and traditions, studying the national characteristics implicit in language has become the most direct means of understanding different cultures. Therefore, the famous American linguist, Edward Spair, said: “There is something behind language. Language cannot exist without culture. Culture is the sum of habits and beliefs inherited from society, which determines the organization of our lives.”[9] Since culture is the basis of human life, language is a part of human culture, the relationship between the two is inseparable, and language has accumulated innumerable “cultural deposits” in its own historical torrent, so the application of language, no matter what inseparable from the background of national culture [10].

Looking at the above, because the study of language is always inseparable from the large framework of culture, and with the advancement of science and technology, mutual understanding between different countries has become urgent and necessary. It has become an independent branch of linguistics. Linguistic and cultural studies inherited and developed the theories and methods of linguistics and national conditions in the early days of its establishment. At the same time, it also benefited from the ideas of other interdisciplinary disciplines in terms of theoretical self-sufficiency, epistemology, and methodology innovation. That is to say, linguistic culture is an emerging discipline established on the basis of linguistic philosophy, ethnology, cultural studies, sociology, cultural anthropology and other disciplines, combined with sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics and other linguistic branches. [11]

In Russia, some scholars also pay attention to the research and development of linguistic culture. The first to use "Лингвокультурология" as a term in their works include В.Н. Телия, Ю.С. Степанов, Н.Д. Арутюнова, Л.Н. Мурзин, В.Шаклеин, and different scholars have different definitions of

linguistic culture. We use the definition in the book “*Language Culture*” by B.A. It is a discipline that studies the national culture attached to and expressed in language. She argues that language is the carrier of culture for the following reasons:

1. Language acquired through generations is part of culture.
2. Language is an indispensable means for human beings to master culture.
3. Language is one of the most important cultural phenomena, because if we try to understand the essence of culture—such as science, religion, literature, etc.—we should regard them as some kind of code similar to language, because it is passed down naturally. The language has more room for development. That is, the concepts and thinking implied by culture can only be highlighted through natural language.

B.A. Маслова emphasizes the media function of language, and the focus of linguistic and cultural research is the commonality and individuality of different nations conveyed by different languages [12].

As a comprehensive subject, Linguistics and Cultures has formed many different schools, among which “the worldview of language” is the research opportunity of this paper. It was the philosopher L. Wittgenstein who first introduced the term “world picture” from physics to the field of humanities and social sciences. He believed that “the totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world.” [13] The term was then applied to cultural studies, linguistics, semiotics, and ethnology, and the definition gradually became clear. The definition given by R. Redfield, the founder of American cognitive anthropology, is: the world picture is the typical subjective cognition of a certain nation to the universe, and it is the general conception of the members of the society on their own actions and active cognition in the world. Therefore, they are good at examining the world picture of the nation from the perspective of the members of the society from the inside of the foreign cultural society, describing it in terms unique to the nation and empathizing with it in terms of life experience [14].

In the 1990s, Russian scholars began to pay attention to the world picture on the synchronic level, that is, the contemporary and realistic one. Since language is no longer just a connecting point between people in the contemporary world, but carries the connotation of national culture, it has also become one of the important entry points for studying the individuality and commonality of national culture. W. Humboldt of Germany also believed that the different languages used by different nations must have different perceptions of the external world, and on this basis he admitted that “language is indispensable for the formation of world outlook (Weltanschauung).” [15] Therefore, starting from the language, we can study the national cognition carried by the language, and then sort out the differences in cognition of the world by various nations and countries.

### 3. COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND RUSSIAN KINSHIP TERMS

Appellation are the most daily expressions in human life, and the concept of “home” contained in them is closely related to our history, society, and national characteristics. However, the scope of kinship is very wide, and the definitions in dictionaries and legal levels are different, not to mention that in the evolution of history, various kinship terms have undergone changes over time, resulting in differences in structure and semantics. In addition to the individual development of written and spoken dialects, it is difficult to study the semantic and cultural differences between Russian and Chinese relative terms. Therefore, if we want to compare the similarities and differences of relative terms between Russian and Chinese, we must give a clear definition of relative terms, and use the historical and cultural track to help establish the concept of understanding the world picture of this language.

Relatives can be as close as parents, brothers and sisters, as far as a common ancestor with someone for thousands of years, and different cultural structures also determine the distance between the category of kinship and the actual kinship. The unlimited expansion of the category of kinship, the following will use dictionaries and legal provisions to establish the common definition of kinship in Russian and Chinese:

The so-called “relatives” in Russian and Chinese mean blood relatives from one's own body, lineal relative (a blood relative in the direct line of descent) from one's own body, collateral blood relatives of the same origin as oneself, spouse, spouse of blood relatives, blood relatives of spouse, spouses of



blood relatives, and finally, kinship relations formed through adoption or adoption procedures. As for the kinship relationship established by the Russian nation through religion, such as godfather and godmother, these are special words that are not included in the general sense of kinship, and there is no such relationship in Chinese, so they cannot be compared.

Based on this definition, we find that the kinship appellation system records the evolution of the human kinship structure. Such a system not only expresses the connection within the family, but is also used to explain the relationship with the outside. Through the comparison of the two, it will be found that they are very different in origin, development and system structure:

### 3.1. System Evolution

The Russian kinship appellation system changed around the 18th to 19th centuries, which also gradually established the modern Russian standard language, and many kinship appellations became old words in the 20th century, making the Russian kinship appellation towards the direction of classification closer, called the system known today. Therefore, compared with the Russian kinship system known in modern times, the previous system is more sophisticated and complex, and if derivative words are added, the number will be larger than the modern kinship appellation system.

### 3.2. Expression of Consanguinity

First of all, the modern Russian kinship appellation system has no mechanism for distinguishing between “paternal appellation” and “matriarchal appellation” in the collateral line. The first collateral blood relatives of the respected generation were once distinguished, namely: “стрый. (uncle), стрья (aunt)”, “уй (uncle), уйка (aunt)”, and later the first collateral blood relatives of the respected generation were not distinguished. Men are called дядя, and women are called тётя. Furthermore, many appellations of consanguineous relatives have many derivatives, such as the first collateral appellations of consanguineous relatives, “брат (brother)”, “сестра (sister)”, etc. These derivatives are mostly used to refer to peers or younger generations, and some clearly indicate paternal or matrilineal. Through the use of derivatives, the Russian kinship appellation system can be distinguished more precisely. In addition, the appellations of collateral blood relatives in Russian have never been widely expanded, that is, there are no specific appellations. After the 20th century, after the appearance of auxiliary adjectives such as Russian’s own words “двоюродный” and “троюродный”, they seemed to be able to extend indefinitely in theory. In this way, the structure of relative appellations in Russian can even be developed larger than that in Chinese. However, in fact, only “троюродный” is more commonly used, and it is usually a written style used in official documents.

### 3.3. In-Law expression

In Russian, the spouses of the first blood relatives of the respected generation are called “дядя” for men, and “тётя” for women; the spouses of blood relatives of the same generation and the inferior generation are called “зять” for men, and women have “ятровь” for brothers’ wives before the 19th century, which is quite In Chinese, “sister-in-law (嫂嫂)”, “sister-in-law (弟媳)”, after it became an old word, all spouses of male blood relatives of the same generation are called “невестка”. However, the Russian language has clear references to the appellations of the spouse's blood relatives. For example, the husband's parents, brothers and sisters, wife's parents, and brothers and sisters all have their own nouns. свояк (husband of wife’s sister) and зять (husband of husband's sister), formerly ятровь (wife's brother's wife and husband's brother's wife) are now obsolete words, and the derivatives of ятровь, ятровья, the derivatives of шурина, шурич, are no longer used.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The kinship appellation system in Chinese is much more complicated than that in Russian. Although the number of appellations in *Erya·Shiqin* at the beginning is not as many as in later dynasties, it already has the embryonic form of today's Chinese appellation system. Thousands of years later, the evolution of Chinese appellation system is mainly based on the original addition of synonyms. The evolution of the Chinese kinship appellation system has only a tendency to shrink obviously in terms of structure, among which paternal appellations are the most obvious: in the past, it was recorded as Gaozu, Xiajiyunsun, and the collateral line expanded to the fourth collateral line; today, it is recorded from grandfather to grandson, the collateral line is only counted to the second collateral line, and the number can be said to be greatly reduced. In addition, there is another big difference between the Chinese kinship appellation system and the Russian one, that is, the unequal number of male and

female appellations, among which male appellations are the most abundant. For example, there are no titles of grandson-in-law, granddaughter, and grandson-in-law in *EryaShiqin*, and grandson, grandson-in-law, granddaughter, and grandson-in-law are not recorded in *EryaShiqin* and *Appellate Record*. It is also like the brothers in the fourth collateral line of the same generation, but there is no corresponding female title. According to the characteristics of Chinese word-formation rules, it can be speculated that the relative word should be “clan sister”. This phenomenon of not recording women's titles can even show the clues of the implicit inequality between men and women in the kinship title system.

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### Authors' Biography



Andrew Jinlong Han is a 10th grade student at Jericho High School in New York. He is fluent in four languages: Chinese, English, Russian, and Spanish. Due to the unique cultural background, Andrew always had and maintained a strong research interest in the differences in the languages, cultures, sports, education and other humanities fields of China, the United States and Russia. So far, Andrew Han has published a number of high-quality academic papers on well-known journals in China, the United States and Russia.

**Citation:** Andrew J. Han. "Linguistic Comparison of Russian and Chinese Kinship Terms in the Context of Language and Culture" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 10, no. 11, 2023, pp. 94-99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1011010>.

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