

## **Africa and Africans in the Linguistic Worldview of Russians (From the Results of the ‘Associative’ Experiment)**

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper attempts to explore the linguistic consciousness of Russian people which reflects the fundamental image about the residents of Africa, African culture, Africa’s socio-economic development, the geographical location of Africa and Africa’s nature, and at the same time the fundamental lexical items associated with Africa, which are basically linked with the colour of the skin of Africans and the hot climate of the continent. The image or worldview in this paper is to identify the general opinion which the Russians have about Africa and Africans. It is the picture that is formed in the minds of Russians about the inhabitants of Africa. The image of Africa and Africans in Russian linguistic consciousness is formed from the presentation of the continent of Africa and the people living in it. These conceptions about Africa and Africans by Russians are formed under the influence of historical, geographical, cultural and educational information received from studies in schools, tertiary institutions, books, journals, newspapers. Others are from documentary and animated films, television and radio programmes, personal life experiences and from communicative situations. In spite of the negative social processes in the Russian society, there is practically no reflection of racism and chauvinism in Russian linguistic consciousness about Africa and Africans. Judging from the result of the experiments carried out, negative information about*

*Africa, and above all, Africans is very negligible.*  
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## **Introduction**

‘Associative’ experiment is one of the reliable methods of the study of psychological, categorical and subjective meaning of words, research of the images of consciousness, verbal associations in inter-linguistic and inter-cultural researches.

Despite some set of factors influencing the choice examination of word-reactions, (these could be purely linguistic and even extra-linguistic factors – such as age of the respondents, sex, level of education, profession, personal experience, nationality and the level of possession of the language etc.) during the experiment, more or less of the same type of reactions were given. The reactions were examined as typical not only for the specific group of respondents in our experiment, but for the given linguistic collections as a whole.

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## **‘Associative’ Experiment**

Our ‘associative’ experiment was conducted among three age groups (pupils, students, adults). All the respondents were administered questionnaires with the questions “What association comes to your mind when you encounter these words: *Africa, Africans (man and woman)*?” The data from the result of the experiments received were classified under six sub-groups: ***Person/People; Names; Culture; Socio-Economic Development; Geographical Location; Nature.*** According to the results of our ‘associative’ experiments in which over 330

people (Russians only) of different ages and social standing participated, we could make the following deductions.

The fundamental associations linked with the word *Africa* and *Africans* are: *dark-skin/ people with dark skin/ negro* (200 respondents), *heat/hot weather* (142 respondents), *palm (tree)* (49 respondents). From the above data, it is very obvious that in the linguistic consciousness of Russians, climate of the continent and the skin colour of the residents of Africa are fundamentally reflected.

An African man in the consciousness of a Russian is presented as: *man / non-Russian* (32 respondents); *an intelligent/tall/cheerful man* (23 respondents) *with curly long hair* (10 respondents); *a very big and strong man* (11 respondents); *a resident of Africa* (13 respondents); *native/aborigine* (11 respondents). An African woman in the linguistic consciousness of a Russian is: *a tall shapely black woman/in long multi-coloured dress / with beads on her neck / with big earrings on her ears/ big lips* (58 respondents). In the opinions of a Russian, *Africans* are: *good people* (10 respondents) *with white teeth* (21 respondents) *big lips* (10 respondents); *living in tribes* (17 respondents); *good sportsmen* (12 respondents); *having many children* (11 respondents).

The image of Africans in the consciousness of a Russian offers a great number of various associations or lexical items, greater part of which is presented with single examples, which are truly referred to *beauty, physical power and cheerfulness, and good-natured disposition/manners.*

Names of famous Africans are presented in single associations: *Abebe Bekila* (2 respondents); *Kofi Anan* (1 respondent); *Nelson Mandela* (1 respondent); *Patrice Lumumba* (1 respondent). Among others are names of some afro-Americans and English, who are regarded to be Africans by Russians: *Mike Tyson* (3 respondents); *Will Smith* (2 respondents); *David Livingstone* (1 respondent). It is possible that some of such associations are linked to their African origin itself or the ancestors. Consequently, people from other continents with black skin are also assumed to be Africans such as (*Pele* of Brazil).

Some Russian writers, whose works and destiny are so linked with Africa, are associated with Africa in the linguistic consciousness of Russian. Such writers are: *Pushkin* (1 respondent); *Chukovskii* (1 respondent). In some of the responses we got were the inclusion of names of famous Africans such as: *Muamar Gadaffi* (President of Libya); *Wole Soyinka* (Writer, Nobel Prize Winner 1986 in Literature); *George Opom Wei* (International footballer) among others.

Among the best well-known ‘topographical names’ of Africa identified by Russians are: *Nile* (48 respondents); *Sahara* (14 respondents); *Egypt* (13 respondents); *Kenya* (3 respondents); *South Africa* (3 respondents). From the results of our experiment, it is obvious that Russians are more knowledgeable with African ‘toponymy’ than with African anthropological names – ‘anthroponyms’. And so the topographical understanding is reflected in the Russian’s knowledge of the longest river in Africa – *Nile*, the highest mountain in Africa – *Kilimanjaro*, the most famous desert in Africa – *Sahara*. *River Limpopo* (5 respondents) is made popular to Russians through the tales written by a famous Russian writer Kolya Chukovskii. Names of popular cartoons also reflect African coloration – *Lion King* (2 respondents); *Bonifatsii* (1 respondent); *Chunga changa* (1 respondent).

The knowledge of Russian people about African *culture* is reflected in the following associations: *African dance* (32 respondents); *Safari* (23 respondents); *Egyptian pyramid* (9 respondents). Every ten respondents in our experiments named in capacity of the cultural aspect of dance with different attributes: *African dance, ritual dance, beautiful dance, rhythmic dance, dancing around camp-fire*. Among the attributes of African culture are the names of *many ornaments / jewelry / beads / bracelet / ring / ear-ring in the nose* (20 respondents); *African braids* (9 respondents); *African drum / tom-tom* (8 respondents); *embankment band* (5 respondents); *piercing of the nose and ears* (4 respondents); *traditional / national costume / attire* (2 respondents); *feather / pen* (3 respondents).

On the presentation of African countries as countries of culture, we have the following lexical items and phrases: *custom*

*/ tradition / rite / interesting culture / a country of high national cultural tradition etc.* (13 respondents). Such fundamental elements of culture, such as religion, national menu, language were also presented in the units of association: *religion* (1 respondent); *exotic food* (1 respondent); *other languages* (2 respondents).

Associations of special interest are presented in the joint group *Socio-economic development*. In the consciousness of Russians, Africa is considered as a continent with rich and abundant natural resources. This is shown in the associated lexical items such as *crude oil, gold, diamond* (20 respondents); *coffee, cocoa* (2 respondents). At the same time Africa is invariably a continent with inadequate and poor economic development: *starving population / hunger / inadequate food / hungry children* (16); *sickness / infectious diseases / HIV / AIDS / smallpox* (13 respondents). In the same category, the Russians have other words to associate Africa with such as: *poverty / penury / poor countries / anything poor and far* (25 respondents).

As a result of the long period and existence of colonization in Africa, it is therefore imperative to arouse the consciousness of Russians about Africans as people with the status of *slave / slavery* (9 respondents). The Russians also name associated Africa with lexical items such as: *colony / colonized by Britain* (5 respondents); *unemployment / unpaid workforce / cheap / hard labour* (4 respondents); *apartheid / fighter for justice / racial discrimination* (3 respondents). Others are: *illiteracy / many uneducated people* (5 respondents); *middle-income class / insufficient economic developments / low level of technology / poor development / economic backwardness* (5 respondents); *shortage of drinking water / water deficit / well* (3 respondents); *insufficient clothes* (2 respondents) – all of which portray the presentation about Africa as a continent of poverty.

In the result of our research, we often encounter words with related meaning in the answer: *continent / one of the continents / Black continent / part of the world* (34 respondents). The image of Africa in the linguistic consciousness of Russians is presented in the word *country* in combination with different

attributes: *very dark country / country, where people live / marvellous exotic country / tourist countries* (25 respondents) etc. Word such as *island* (8 respondents) found in the Russian linguistic consciousness about Africa could probably come from the Island of Madagascar, which is part of the topographical feature found in a country in Africa. However, similar associated word of the continent 'Africa' speaks about indistinct differentiation of the concepts *country – continent – island* in the linguistic consciousness Russians, and also about the presentation of Africa as a single entity or as a one country or as something uniform. In this given context, Africa projects a wider concept, more than just a state (in which more than 50 countries exist in the territory of Africa).

From the fact that African continent lies along the Equator, attracts the following associations: *Equator / country, through which passes Equator / Equatorial location* (10 respondents).

Words that are related with the *nature/natural endowments* of Africa, we distribute it into several sub-groups: climate, natural relief, animal, and vegetation.

Majority of our respondents are well vested with knowledge of the *nature/natural endowments* of the continent. Couple with the above fact, it is not surprising that Africa in the linguistic consciousness of Russians is synonymous with the understanding of very high temperature in the continent. This is visible from the answers from our respondents linking Africa with the hot weather of the continent: *heat / very hot / hot summer / intense heat / very hot climate / a country that is very hot* (142 respondents); *warm* (11 respondents); *continuous/eternal summer* (3 respondents) etc. Africa is also associated with dry and sunny weather: *sun* (34 respondents); *dry / burning / aridity* (5 respondents). At the same time Africa in several parts could be taken as a *tropical rainforest* (3 respondents).

In the group *Animal*, there is a wide range of answers which demonstrates good knowledge of the fauna in African continent. Possibly, the answers given here are as a result of the influence of documentary films about Africa, children cartoons,

and also books especially Kornya Chukovskii's *Barmalei* and *Doktor Aibolit*. Among the wild animals in Africa popular among Russians are: *elephant* (31 respondents); *crocodile* (21 respondents); *monkey* (21 respondents); *giraffe* (13 respondents); *lion* (11 respondents); *hippopotamus* (5 respondents); *zebra* (4 respondents); *tiger* (3 respondents); *rhinoceros* (3 respondents) etc. Majority of our correspondents describe Africa as the abode of *wild animals / too many wild animals* (22 respondents). The only domestic animal representing economic importance known to Russians is *camel* (4 respondents). Among the birds in Africa, the most known by the Russians is *parrot* (2 respondents).

Among the African well-known *crops* associated with Africa in the linguistic consciousness Russians is *palm tree* (49 respondents). Africa is traditionally regarded by Russians as a continent endowed with exotic fruits: *banana* (30 respondents); *coconut* (15 respondents); *pineapple* (2 respondents); *abundance of exotic fruits* (13 respondents). Although these lexical units clearly show the degree of acquaintance of Russian people with the vegetative world of Africa, however, there is a clear demonstration of weak knowledge of other elements of African flora.

*Natural features* associated with the word *Africa*, in the opinion of our respondents are: *desert/wilderness* (27 respondents); *sand* (9 respondents); *savannah* (9 respondents) etc. Russians also view Africa as a thick green forest as demonstrated by the lexical item *jungle* (17 respondents). Again African continent represents an exotic place with the use of such lexical items as: *exotica* (6 respondents), surrounded by large volume of water: *sea / turquoise sea / ocean* (4 respondents).

From the total number of 1611 lexical units associated with Africa and Africans, 550 lexical units are connected with *person/people* and 574 lexical units are connected with *nature*. Similar ratio reflects anthropological focus of the linguistic consciousness of Russians and good knowledge of the nature of African continent.

### **Analysis of the Result of the Experiment by Age and Gender**

We have a little number of lexical items (298) in the *pupils' group* depending on the level of knowledge and the vocabulary of our respondents. In the other two groups, the ratio of the answers is approximately the same – 623 lexical items (*students' group*) and 690 lexical items (*adults' group*).

The fundamental answers in the *Pupils' group* are connected with the presentation about *Person / People* – 52%. The answers from this group also present wider knowledge about *Nature* – 30%. The school children also have good understanding about the *Geographical position* of the continent – 9.4%, but weak knowledge about *African Culture* – 5%, *Socio-Economic development* – 1.3% and practically have no idea about *African names* – 1.3%.

In the *Students' group*, the basic percentage of the answers is linked with the *nature* of Africa – 35.5%, and also a wider presentation of associations with *Person / People* – 33%. 12.1% represents the answers about the *Geographical position* of the continent. 8.5% represent *African culture*. We have *African names* and *Socio-economic development* 5.5% and 5.1% respectively from the total number of the answers.

In the *Adult group*, the basic percentage of answers is connected with *nature* – 38.1%. Lexical units which reflect the knowledge about African *Person/People* form 27.8% answers, whereas we have 52% and 33% in the *Pupils' group* and *Students' group* respectively. The answers from *Adults' group* demonstrate wider knowledge about *African Culture* 13.6% compared with the *Pupils' group* and *Students' group* respectively.

We could therefore draw conclusion, that boys and girls of school age have approximately the same conception or idea about Africa and her realities, which is due to the course programmes in school, animated and scientific-popular films and inter-family communications. It is also pertinent to note here that Kornya Chukovskii's *Barmalei* and *Doktor Aibolit* play a prominent role in shaping the mentality of Russian children about the conception and the formation of the image of Africa. It is significant to note that the *Students' group*, representing our



respondents, display well-developed presentation, high level of knowledge and readiness/willingness to answer. Male students have more lexical items/associations in the *Socio-economic development* of Africa (51/21), *Culture* of Africa (31/22), and better familiarity with proper *Names* that are linked with Africa (27/7). Female students gave more answers that are linked with the *Nature* (101/120), *Geographical location* of Africa (12/20). Women, above all pay more attention on appearance and characteristics, traits/character of African people. Similar distinction is most likely the index of differences in the male and female linguistic consciousness in the *adults' group*.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we could conclude that in the linguistic consciousness of Russian people reflects the fundamental image about the residents of Africa, about African culture, about Africa's socio-economic development, about the geographical location of Africa and about the Africa's nature, and at the same time the fundamental lexical items associated with Africa are linked with the colour of the skin of Africans and the hot climate of the continent.

In spite of the negative social processes in the Russian society, there is practically no reflection of racism and chauvinism in Russian linguistic consciousness about Africa and Africans. Negative information about Africa, and above all, Africans is very negligible.

We have been able to reveal the profile of the lexical items that are associated with the units *Africa*, *Africans* (male and female) as witnessed in the necessity of the deepening knowledge of Russians about the *Black Continent* and its residents, about the increasing quantity of information related to Africa and its people in the Russian mass media, science, publications, arts and literature texts.

It is therefore through such avenue of information and one-on-one contact and encounter with Africans that the Russians form the image of Africa in their linguistic consciousness.

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