

## NATIONAL STEREOTYPES AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BRITONS AND BULGARIANS

*The paper discusses issues related to the concepts of «national character», «national stereotypes» and «cultural differences». It is an attempt to illustrate and analyze some cultural differences between two nations – Britons and Bulgarians. The findings shared are based on interviews and research among representatives of these nations, Internet and media sources, as well as on personal observations.*

**Keywords:** national character; national stereotype; cultural differences; social behaviour; national psychology.

**Introduction.** Nowadays, when the world is becoming more and more globalized, culture and cultural issues are gaining supreme importance not only in international affairs and business, but also in many other spheres of life. The concept of culture and cultural differences has become something of a fashionable cliché in language-teaching circles in recent years since it is more than clear that communication, language and culture cannot be separated.

One of the essential assumptions of modern foreign language teaching is the need for intercultural competence. The ability to successfully communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, understanding of their behavior, values and ways of thinking requires an adequate degree of cross-cultural awareness because «Misconceptions about different cultures often prevent people from understanding each other adequately. They create serious barriers in international relations that may result in alienation, stereotyping, and formation of enemy images» [1].

On the other hand, «The comparison of cultures with language being taught opens great vistas for the teacher and provides a basis for better understanding of persons from other backgrounds» [2].

In general, the cultural element in foreign language learning must focus on appreciating cultural diversity and negotiating differences between cultures with the goal of bridging these differences.

The present paper discusses issues related to the notions of «national character», «national stereotypes» and «cultural differences». It is an attempt to illustrate and analyze some cultural differences between two nations – Britons and Bulgarians. The findings shared are based on interviews and research among representatives of these nations, Internet and media sources, as well as on personal observations.

**Stereotypes and stereotyping.** A popular old joke exists, which says that heaven is where the police are English, the cooks are French, the mechanics are German, the lovers are Italian and everything is organized by the Swiss. Hell is where the police are German, the cooks are English, the lovers are Swiss, and the Italians organize everything. This joke is an example of generalized national stereotypes.

Undoubtedly, every national culture has distinct characteristics that make it different from any other culture. Some of these differences are quite evident (e. g. language, religion, political organization, traditions, etc.), others are quite subtle. The idea that each nation has its own character gave rise to sciences such as national psychology, cultural and social anthropology, etc.

National psychology refers to the (real or alleged) distinctive psychological make-up of particular nations, ethnic groups or peoples. The assumption of national psychology is that different ethnic groups, or the people living in a national territory, are characterized by a distinctive «mix» of human attitudes, values, emotions, motivation and abilities which is culturally reinforced by language, the family, schooling, the state and the media [3].

Closely related is the idea of the national character which refers to the values, norms and customs which people of a nation typically hold, their typical emotional responses, and what they regard as virtue and vice – all factors which determine how they will habitually respond to situations [4].

The idea of a «national character» is based on the assumption that people from one nation share basic common behavioral patterns and personality traits, differentiable from other nations. This concept has however been often criticized and refuted by the fact that such attempts to categorize cultural characteristics of a given nation often end up in cultural stereotypes that are unfair and misleading [5].

The term «stereotype» was first popularized in 1922 by the American journalist Walter Lippmann in his book «Public Opinion». He wrote: «Whether right or wrong, ...imagination is shaped by the pictures seen... Consequently, they lead to stereotypes that are hard to shake». The idea was that the reality is too complex to be understood as a whole, so people tend to generalize and oversimplify the surrounding world perceiving and interpreting it in schemes and stereotypes («pictures in our heads») [6]. Stereotypes are concepts held by one social group about another. Common stereotypes include a variety of allegations about groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or religious belief, along with professional and social class.

**Positive and negative effects of stereotyping.** There is no doubt that stereotypes make reality easier to deal with because they simplify the complexities that make people unique, and this simplification reflects important beliefs and values. The problem, however, is that stereotypes are not usually related to a direct experience – they are just a result of interpretations and traditions. In fact, they are closely related to the notion of «otherness». We are most likely to hold stereotypes about groups of people who we do not perceive to be like us and of whom we have only limited experience. Anthropologists have discovered that, when faced by an interaction or behaviour they do not understand, people tend to interpret the others as «abnormal», «wrong», «weird» [7]. This naturally leads to misunderstanding, hostility and conflicts.

In practice, there is not a man that never uses stereotypes when he gathers impressions and makes decisions about the type of behavior he has to follow. Stereotyping is a natural function of the human mind. National and cultural stereotypes do play an important role in how people perceive themselves and others. But they can also cause a great deal of harm. Both history and current events are full of examples in which unfavorable stereotypes contribute to prejudice, discrimination, persecution or even genocide. We need not go far in the past for examples – it is quite enough to remember the fascist stereotypes of Aryan race and the Jews. Apparently, such stereotypes and prejudices can be corrected by accurate understanding of other peoples and their cultures, because, as a British journalist puts it, «Globalization does not lead to ironing out of national characteristics. On the contrary, it leads to a stronger than ever desire to huddle together for safety. So, nowadays it is much more important to try to find things that bring people together – things that are similar for us all» [8].

According to a large-scale study of the opinions of more than a thousand young people in Eastern, Central and Western Europe carried out by a Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, stereotypes of different nationalities are determined by the economic and competitive relations between nations and reflect international conflicts. The results of this opinion poll have shown that well-educated young people consider nations, which do not constitute a threat for their country to be «fair». They also consider the citizens of prosperous nations to be «competent». Another conclusion from this research is that competence as a stereotype quality of a certain nationality mirrors the economic power of that nation, while the quality of morality reflects the mutual relationships between nations. The economic power of a country is taken to reflect the intelligence of its inhabitants and the efficiency they display at work. Therefore, Britons, Germans and Italians won high marks for competence in the opinion poll, whereas Russians, Byelorussians and Bulgarians were considered the least competent. The level of honesty, tolerance, aggression and selfishness with which each nationality was credited depended on the threat posed by the nation in terms of size, nationalism and conflicting interests. The young people considered that the peoples of small countries where there is little nationalism were in general more honest, tolerant, less aggressive and less selfish [9]. As it seems, such findings can to a great extent account for some of the ways Britons and Bulgarians are stereotyped.

**Stereotypes held by Britons and Bulgarians about each other.** What are the most popular stereotypes held by Britons and Bulgarians about each other? In general, the opinions expressed in the interviews taken show that both nations know little about one another and seem prone to think in stereotypes. The following table allows us to see how Bulgarians and Britons view each other.

Britons about Bulgarians	Bulgarians about Britons
<b>Bulgarians are:</b> friendly, hospitable, hardworking, proud of their history and traditions, patriotic <b>but</b> poor, backward, pessimistic, inert, naive, deceitful, corrupt.	<b>Britons are:</b> polite, self-reliant, ambitious, energetic, independent, <b>but</b> too conservative, formal, materialistic, haughty, sometimes arrogant.
<b>Bulgarians look:</b> sad, oppressed, smiling but unhappy, tired, suspicious, intimidated.	<b>Britons look:</b> confident, prosperous, kind but not always sincere, reserved, cold.
<b>Bulgarians like:</b> their traditions, folk music and dances, foreigners, football, strong homemade alcoholic drinks.	<b>Britons like:</b> their homes, money, gardening and flowers, fish and chips, football, the Queen.
<b>Bulgarians always:</b> complain about their life, try to smuggle something, try to make a profit on everything, take care of their families, speak about work.	<b>Britons always:</b> stick to tradition, keep a stiff upper lip, demonstrate superiority, stand in line, drink tea at 5 p.m., drink tea with milk.
<b>Bulgarians never:</b> arrive in time, keep promises, look on the bright side of things, trust foreigners.	<b>Britons never:</b> waste time or money, disclose their real feelings, complain, eat much bread.

These opinions can be associated with differences between the two nations in their national psychology, social behaviour, communication styles, and view of life and world. However, when speaking about the cultural stereotypes attributed to Bulgarians and Britons, a reservation should be made that undoubtedly differences between individuals within any given nation or culture are

much greater than differences between nations. Education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, past experience, affection shown in the home, and myriad of other factors affect our behaviour and culture and make us different.

In fact, most Bulgarians are not at all different from most British people in the way they perceive things or in

their desired lifestyle. However, there are some peculiarities that emerge when you get to know them closer.

**Cultural differences between Britons and Bulgarians.** The differences between Bulgarians and Britons can be summarized in two areas: national psychology and social behaviour.

**1. National psychology.** In the past, it was believed that every nation had a specific «spirit» and the problems of national character came down to throwing light on the peculiarities of this spirit. It is clear nowadays that the phenomenon «national character», understood as a complex of personal traits typical for all or most representatives of a nation, does not exist. There are not any unchanging over centuries, genetically determined, psychological or moral traits that can be attributed to a nation. Yet, the term «national character» does exist if we consider it as a complex of cultural values, behavioral norms and traditions specific for the given nation.

It is quite clear that, being located in the farthest, opposite corners of the continent, having quite different historical destiny and non-comparable contemporary positions in the world, the two peoples in question will have absolutely different national identity, self-esteem, philosophy, and mentality.

According to a British journalist, «When reading some British newspapers, it seems that to be born and live in the UK means to have won first prize in the lottery of life» [10]. It seems that a statement like this is indicative enough to express the essence of the British national psychology. And a quotation from a British site – an opinion expressed by a Russian journalist: «British are obsessed with measuring others by their yardstick, naively assuming that some alleged similarities between them and foreigners may flatter the latter» [11].

On the other hand, the German ethno-psychologist Reinhold Schiffer wrote in his «Oriental Panorama»: «Ready wit and flexibility have helped Bulgarians survive even in a most challenging environment. Survival instinct, however, goes hand in hand with a national inferiority complex» [12]. Another indicative statement. Surviving is said to be the national sport of Bulgarians.

The findings of a Bulgarian-Finnish study held in 2004 are also interesting to mention. According to these findings, «Bulgarians are overwhelmed by scepticism. Some of them tend to trust themselves as individuals, but do not trust the prospects of the Bulgarian nation as a whole. Asked about their opinion on what other nations think about them, 65 % of Bulgarians responded that most foreigners tend to see them as primitive, uncivilized, poor and undereducated». How should this low self-esteem be explained? Some ethno-psychology experts associate this fact with the five centuries of Ottoman domination, the 45-years period under communism, and the long transition period with the frequent crises troubling the economy, education and culture [13].

**2. Social behaviour.** Presumably, there are many aspects of social behaviour, which are universal for both Britons and Bulgarians, but still there are aspects that are quite different:

– **Formality and politeness**

British people are usually considered to be more reserved in manners, dress and speech than Bulgarians. Basic politeness is more or less the same in both

countries, with the exception that British people tend to thank more often, even in the cases when they have been thanked. They also say «sorry» even to people who accidentally bumped into them on the street, which is a bit strange to Bulgarians.

In Bulgaria, it is still considered polite that when entering or getting off a vehicle men step out first so as to offer their hand to the woman whom they are accompanying. In public transport young people and men usually give their seats to mothers with children, the old or disabled people.

– **Attitude to time**

It is a well-known fact that British people are very sensitive to time. Punctuality is a must in Britain and arriving a few minutes early for safety is recommendable. In Bulgaria, it is polite to be on time, five to ten minutes delay is tolerated, but more than 15 minutes are too much to wait. Bulgarian business meetings usually start a few minutes after the time arranged and often last longer than anticipated – in fact, until all topics are comprehensively covered.

– **Standing in line**

Queuing and patiently waiting for your turn, which is a strong tradition in Britain, is also very popular in Bulgaria but «queue jumping» is sometimes possible and tolerated.

– **Privacy**

Privacy is greatly valued by British people. It is very important to Bulgarians, too, but asking some personal or intimate questions about age, marital or health status, religious belonging or money is sometimes considered acceptable in Bulgaria.

– **Eye contact**

In British culture, certain amount of eye contact is required, but too much makes many people uncomfortable. In Bulgaria, direct eye contact in conversations is considered an indicator of honesty, sincerity and trust. The lack of it is assumed suspicious.

Whereas staring at anyone in public is impolite in Britain, it is not so severely judged in Bulgaria and can be excused by the natural Bulgarian curiosity.

– **Personal space**

Personal space is something very important in Britain and people can feel very uncomfortable, if someone stands too close to them. Touching is generally avoided. In Bulgaria, people are not so sensitive to this, for example, backslapping and hugging seem acceptable not only among close friends – these gestures can just show support and patronizing attitude.

– **Gestures**

It's widely known that some very ordinary and popular in a given culture gestures can have quite a different or even insulting meaning in another culture. In Bulgaria, pointing with your index finger at objects or people is considered bad manners; it is only acceptable in shops.

Nodding means «no» and shaking you head from side to side means «yes».

Waving «goodbye» is expressed by raising your hand and waving it not from side to side, which means «hello», but waving front to back only the fingers.

Winking is sometimes used to show that the speaker is kidding or does not believe your words.

– **Small talk topics**

British people usually avoid gossiping about neighbours or colleagues and talking about politics. Bulgarians take

pleasure in talking about politics and sometimes tend to gossip at work.

Speaking about earnings is sometimes acceptable among Bulgarians.

– *Invitations*

It is quite rare for British people to go to someone's house without having arranged it first. In Bulgaria, you don't always need a special invitation to visit your friends' or relatives' place, although these things tend to change lately.

– *Gift giving*

There are no great differences here except for the fact that, when giving flowers in Bulgaria, the number of stems should be odd. Even numbers of flowers are usually used for funerals.

– *Dining etiquette*

Table manners in Bulgaria do not differ from these in Britain, but it is interesting to mention that eating more food is considered to show appreciation for it. Usually, the hosts insist that you eat or drink some more.

When emptied, glasses are always refilled. If you do not want to drink more, you have to leave a mouthful at the bottom of your glass.

– *Attitude to foreigners*

Unlike Britons, Bulgarians do not feel easy about talking to strangers on the street, but if you start a conversation and ask for some help, almost all will be open and helpful because of their natural curiosity about foreigners. Generally speaking, Bulgarian society is very friendly to foreigners.

***Similarities between Britons and Bulgarians.*** Strange as it may seem, there exist some common aspects characteristic to both nations.

***The past.*** Although on the surface the two peoples' historical destiny is absolutely opposite – the British colonial past and the Bulgarian slavery past under Ottomans, they still have something in common:

– The strategic location of their lands, their crossroads position made these territories desired, invaded and inhabited by lots of different tribes in their furthest past.

– There was a Celtic tribe that lived on the contemporary Bulgarian territory around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The name of the river Danube is Celtic by origin and means «Brown River».

– The two nations suffered quite long periods of foreign invasion during the Middle Ages – the Danish and the Norman conquests on the British Isles and the Byzantine and the Ottoman domination on the Balkans.

***The language.*** The history of development of the two languages – English and Bulgarian – is very similar. As it is known, the English language belongs to the group of the Germanic languages, and the Bulgarian language belongs to the group of the Slavonic languages. Both languages, however, are described as exceptions from their groups because they both are analytical languages, while the rest of their groups are synthetic (grammatical relations between the words in the sentence are expressed by means of cases and lots of inflections). The old English and the old Bulgarian were highly synthetic languages – the nouns were divided into declensions and the verbs into conjugations. Both languages have now remnants from these systems in the plural forms of some nouns and in the types of verbs, in the case forms of the personal pronouns. The category of definiteness/indefiniteness is expressed in a similar way in both languages – by means of articles. The only difference is that the English articles are separate elements situated before the nouns they determine and the Bulgarian articles are parts of the nouns placed at their ends.

***Conclusions.*** The comparison of cultures within foreign language teaching raises learners' cross-cultural awareness and increases the effectiveness of their intercultural communicative competence.

When discussing cultural differences, the idea must be taken into account that cultures may differ to a greater or lesser extent, countries and politicians may contrast and argue, but people, nonetheless, share a common humanity.

Unfavourable stereotypes and prejudices can be corrected by accurate understanding of other peoples and their cultures.

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### **НАЦІОНАЛЬНІ СТЕРЕОТИПИ ТА КУЛЬТУРНІ ВІДМІННОСТІ МІЖ БРИТАНЦЯМИ ТА БОЛГАРАМИ**

*У статті висвітлені питання, що стосуються концептів «національний характер», «національний стереотип» та «культурні відмінності». Розвідка є спробою проаналізувати та навести приклади деяких культурних відмінностей між двома націями: британцями та болгарами. Матеріалом для статті послужили інтерв'ю та дослідження серед представників цих націй, інтернет- та медіа-джерела, а також особисті спостереження.*

**Ключові слова:** національний характер; національний стереотип; культурні відмінності; соціальна поведінка; національна психологія.

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### **НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ СТЕРЕОТИПЫ И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ РАЗЛИЧИЯ МЕЖДУ БРИТАНЦАМИ И БОЛГАРАМИ**

*В статье рассматриваются вопросы, касающиеся концептов «национальный характер», «национальный стереотип» и «национальные различия». Была произведена попытка проанализировать и подать примеры некоторых культурных различий между двумя нациями: британцами и болгарами. Материалом для работы послужили интервью и исследования среди представителей этих наций, интернет- и медиа-источники, а также личные наблюдения.*

**Ключевые слова:** национальный характер; национальный стереотип; культурные различия; социальное поведение; национальная психология.