

ГБОУ ГИМНАЗИЯ №248 САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГА

Командный конкурс эссе

**“Unity in Diversity: Russia and the English-Speaking World.**

**Time for Equal Opportunities”**

Исследовательская работа (эссе)

**«The similarities and differences between the Russian, American and  
British senses of humour»**

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Gymnasium (Grammar School) №248 Saint-Petersburg

Group essay contest

**“Unity in Diversity: Russia and the English-Speaking World.**

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Research work (essay)

**« The similarities and differences between the Russian, American and  
British senses of humour »**

Contestants:



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2021

## Theses

- 1. Introduction.** Relevance of the topic. The important role of humour in national consolidation.
- 2. The Analysis of Humour.** Characteristics of humour. What aspects influence humour. Russian humour and its own distinctive features. An average American and their subjects for jokes. Extraordinary Britons and their diverse humour.
- 3. Differences.** The differences of American, Russian and British humour.
- 4. Similarities.** The similarities of American, Russian and British humour.
- 5. Conclusion.** The national humour is not understandable for the foreigners. Translators make foreign humour familiar for everybody.

## **Introduction**

There is one Russian joke: "What is good for a Russian is a death for a German."

Is it possible to use it in relation to the humour of different countries – we will try to figure it out. In our essay we would like to analyze the humour of different countries and to draw certain conclusions based on our analysis. We suppose that the relevance of this topic lies in the fact that humour is a reliable instrument of cementing and consolidation of any nation and we will definitely prove it a little later.

## **The Analysis of Humour**

Undoubtedly, as every other type of humour, Russian humour has its own distinctive features - it is very sharp and lively. Russian humour is extremely relevant, political, and meaningful. Anecdotes, short humorous stories, are very popular in Russia. Anecdote is a folklore genre, a short funny story. It is social in nature, often based on intrastate reasons: If we cannot say something openly, we make up an amusing story and say it as a joke. Mentality and cultural aspects also produce a huge impact on humour. Depending on the content features, all the anecdote themes could be split into ethnic, social, religious and political groups. Anecdotes of the first three groups are frequently offensive, being based on stereotypes or making fun of someone's flaws. An example of an immoral Russian joke: Why did he die? — He was cleaning his gun and accidentally shot himself. And why is he covered in bruises? — He didn't want to clean it. Russian humour is often confusing to foreigners due to complicated wordplay or the use of controversial topics.

While talking about American humour, you first need to understand what an average American is like. Patriotism can be considered as the main quality of an

American citizen, and it also affects the American humour itself. Americans in jokes are frequently characterised as enterprising and hardworking. Having watched an American show or a comedy, one might say that American humour is more of the action humour rather than a word humour. For example, one of the traits of this humour type is taking a silly situation to an extreme. Hyperbolization is also not a rare phenomenon. The subject of American humour does not differ from the subjects of British or Russian humour. It is also closely connected with national characteristics, politics, celebrities, historical figures, etc. However, in American society, jokes offending ethnic, racial, social, religious or gender feelings are considered indecent. A purely American subject for jokes and anecdotes is lawyers. They are regularly being made fun of - "What's the difference between a lawyer and a leech? After you die, a leech stops sucking your blood." Jokes of question-answer type are common among the Americans, but the variety does not end here - "Can all of you, please, go jump off the roof? I'm trying to prove a point of view to my mom." In general, American humour doesn't stand out for its uniqueness or sharpness - it is comprehensible and accessible, but it is not less amusing than, for example, British humour, although people with different mentality may have troubles understanding it.

British humour is the very basis of British character. British people and their humour are connected emotionally, psychologically, genetically and aesthetically. Studying British humour, it is impossible not to pay attention to the peculiarities of the British national character, which represents the results of a rich country history, its traditions, and, of course, the behaviour of British residents.

Speaking of specific personality traits, a veritable typical Englishman is conservative, tactful, practical and law-abiding. On the other hand, British people are characterized as extremely tolerant

towards other nations. However, A. Miall in his book<sup>1</sup> describes British humour as a tool of xenophobia and a peculiar shield, which protects the identity of British consciousness from external intervention. British tactfulness and diplomacy often come to an extreme (this excessive sense of tact is usually being sneered at). Moreover, specifically British inclination of avoiding conflicts relates to this. For example: "At dinner in a rich country mansion, one of the guests, having drunk too much, falls face down on a plate. The owner calls the butler and says, "Smithers, would you, please, prepare a guest room. This gentleman has kindly agreed to stay with us overnight." Despite the unwavering narcissism, British people genuinely like to be slightly ironic about themselves. Moreover, the constant companion of humour is wit, which adds a special originality to British jokes. In addition to the inclination to self-irony, the Englishmen have such a quality as stoicism - an ability to joke in situations that are far from being funny. Every joke can cause a laugh if you keep calm while reading it. This is a rule for Britain.

### **Differences**

In this part we are going to consider the differences of Russian, American and British humour. Firstly, Russian and British humour differs from American by its unique wit and sharpness. Secondly, in the UK and Russia it is quite acceptable to joke about the so-called "forbidden topics" (related to ethnic, racial, social, religious identity), while in the United States of America such topics are a taboo. Thirdly, both, the Russians and the British are rather xenophobic, as it can be seen from their humour. On the contrary, in the United States of America every newcomer to the American continent is a potential American. In addition, although British humour can sometimes be very "black" and even cruel, it still comes second to

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<sup>1</sup>"The Xenophobe's Guide to the English" - A. Miall

Russian humour. Finally, having contrasted American, Russian and British humour, we should mention that British humour is the most difficult for understanding. The main reason is the so-called British stoicism. Foreigners simply cannot distinguish seriousness from a joke.

### **Similarities**

In one of the final points of our essay, we would like to identify the main similarities of humour in three nations. The unique wordplay is common for British, Russian and American humour. The next similarity is the fact that in the UK, in the USA and in Russia, people are immensely interested in politics and often joke about various political figures, for example Queen Elizabeth 2 or Vladimir Putin, or Donald Trump (now J. Biden). Among other similarities the British, Americans and Russians regularly use jokes of the "question — answer" format<sup>2</sup>. Though the humour of all these countries can be called ironic, Americans do not often make fun of themselves, unlike the British and Russians.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, we would like to mention that humour is a diverse aspect of human life that can encompass many spheres and refer to many topics. As a rule, all the differences between the humour of different countries relate to their geographical position and history. For example, the British are particularly xenophobic because they live on islands. Russian humour can be immoral because Russia fought a lot and the attitude of the Russian population to life is different from the American and British.

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<sup>2</sup> Why is England the wettest country?

— Because the queen has reigned there for years!

At the beginning of our essay, we claimed that humour is a reliable instrument of cementing the nation and it undoubtedly is. Analysing the humour we found out that every national humour has a part, which is understandable only for native speakers. Moreover, each humour is distinguished by a variety of wordplay and is inextricably linked with the culture and mentality of this or that country. Due to the humour, representatives of different countries preserve their cultural and national awareness and thereby cement the nation for centuries.

In recent years, the differences in national humour have become less noticeable, because of the processes of globalization. In this respect cultural exchange plays an important role. Therefore, it is difficult to overestimate the contribution made by the translators who gave us a wonderful opportunity to get acquainted with the masterpieces of British and American humorous literature. For example, the brilliant Russian translator S.Marshak translated the humorous story of the American writer O.Henry ("Lost Dress Parade")<sup>3</sup>, and thanks to K.Chukovsky, Russian children are able to enjoy reading the wonderful novel by Mark Twain ("The Adventures of Tom Sawyer")<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to numerous translations, many works of foreign writers have become available to the whole world and the translators managed to convey notes of humour (Three Men in a Boat To say Nothing of the Dog" – Jerome K. Jerome, "Kindred Spirits" by O.Henry and many others)<sup>5</sup>.

Ultimately, we consider that understanding of the humour of different countries brings us closer and helps avoid political and social conflicts. People who

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<sup>3</sup> "Lost Dress Parade" by O.Henry

<sup>4</sup> "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" - Mark Twain

<sup>5</sup> "Three Men in a Boat To say Nothing of the Dog" by Jerome K. Jerome, "Kindred Spirits" by O.Henry)



understand and respect the culture of another country will never allow war. We would better laugh than fight!

## APPLICATION



- *Why is England the wettest country?*

— *Because the queen has reigned there for years!*



- *What's the difference between a lawyer and a leech?*
- *After you die, a leech stops sucking your blood.*



- In the store “World Of Carpets”*
- *Good day, one carpet please*

*-Why are you so moody? Are you going to pack a corpse?*

*- Two carpets.*

*Resources:*

1. Анатомия Английского юмора – Вячеслав Шестаков
2. Xenophobe's Guide to the English – Miall A.
3. The English Sense of Humour – Nicolson H.
4. Эти странные англичане – Майол Э., Милстед Д.
5. How to be an Alien//Genuine English Humour – Mikes G.
6. English Humour – Priestley J.B.
7. Шутка в культурах Великобритании и России - Ильина О.К
8. Behind Poker Faces – Kevin M.F. Platt
9. Русские: стереотипы поведения, традиции, ментальность - Алла Сергеева
10. Национально-специфические черты американского юмора – Немкова А.Р.