



ANTHROPONYMS IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature and evolution of anthroponyms—personal names—in the Russian language. The paper investigates their historical origins, linguistic structure, and cultural significance. Using descriptive, historical, and comparative linguistic methods, it analyzes how Russian anthroponyms have developed under the influence of Slavic traditions, Christianity, and modern globalization. The study demonstrates that Russian personal names serve as markers of cultural identity and linguistic continuity, preserving historical memory while adapting to contemporary naming trends.

INTRODUCTION

Names are among the oldest and most enduring linguistic units in human societies. Every name carries not only a communicative function but also deep social, cultural, and historical meaning. The branch of linguistics that studies proper names is called *onomastics*, and within it, *anthroponymy* deals specifically with human names.

In the Russian context, anthroponyms occupy a unique position. They reflect a complex historical path—from pre-Christian Slavic naming traditions to the adoption of Christian names, and later to the integration of global naming tendencies. Russian names serve as linguistic witnesses of the country's development, documenting changes in religion, class structure, and cultural exchange.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Russian anthroponyms: their etymology, structure, social use, and ongoing evolution. The central research questions are:

1. How have Russian anthroponyms evolved historically?
2. What structural and linguistic features characterize Russian names?
3. How do anthroponyms reflect cultural identity in modern Russia?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to understanding how language, culture, and identity intersect in the system of Russian personal names.

METHODS

The study employs **three main linguistic methods**: descriptive, historical, and comparative.



1. **Descriptive method:** Used to analyze the internal structure and morphological features of Russian anthroponyms. It focuses on how first names, patronymics, and surnames are formed and used in speech and writing.
2. **Historical method:** Applied to trace the development of Russian naming from ancient Slavic origins to the present day. It examines the influence of Christianization, social reforms, and cultural shifts on naming practices.
3. **Comparative method:** Used to identify similarities and differences between Russian anthroponyms and those of other European cultures, especially regarding borrowed elements and phonetic adaptation.

Data sources include academic dictionaries of Russian names, linguistic corpora, and studies on Slavic onomastics (Superanskaya, 2005; Nikonov, 1988; Unbegaun, 1972). Qualitative analysis was chosen to interpret the cultural meanings and social implications of names rather than only their formal linguistic properties.

RESULTS

1. Historical Development

The earliest Russian anthroponyms originated in the **Old Slavic period**. These names were typically *semantic compounds* formed from meaningful roots expressing desirable qualities or virtues—such as *Bogdan* (“given by God”), *Vladislav* (“ruler of glory”), *Dobrynya* (“kind, brave”), and *Miloslav* (“gracious glory”). These names not only identified individuals but also symbolized moral ideals valued by ancient Slavic society.

The **Christianization of Rus’ (988 AD)** brought profound change. The adoption of Orthodox Christianity introduced hundreds of new names of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew origin through the Church’s calendar of saints. Names such as *Ivan* (John), *Maria*, *Pavel*, *Nikolai*, and *Anastasia* gradually replaced many pagan ones.

During the **Tsarist era**, surnames became standardized as society grew more hierarchical. Initially, surnames were privileges of the nobility (*Golitsyn*, *Obolensky*), but by the 18th–19th centuries, they spread across social classes. Peasant surnames often derived from occupations (*Kuznetsov* – “blacksmith”), animals (*Medvedev* – “bear”), or personal traits (*Smirnov* – “quiet one”).

In the **Soviet period**, naming reflected ideological and cultural change. Some parents chose revolutionary or “modern” names, such as *Oktyabrina* (from *Oktyabr*, “October”), *Vladlen* (from *Vladimir Lenin*), and *Ninel* (“Lenin” spelled backward). Although many of these innovations were short-lived, they illustrate how anthroponyms mirrored the spirit of their times.

Today, in post-Soviet Russia, traditional names coexist with globally popular ones like *Mark*, *Eva*, and *Arina*, showing both cultural continuity and openness to international trends.

2. Structure of Russian Anthroponyms

Modern Russian personal names typically consist of **three parts**:

Given name (имя): The individual’s first name, e.g., *Sergey*, *Anna*.

Patronymic (отчество): Formed from the father’s name, expressing lineage, e.g., *Ivanovich* (“son of Ivan”), *Petrovna* (“daughter of Pyotr”).

Surname (фамилия): A hereditary family name, e.g., *Smirnov*, *Petrova*.



This tripartite naming system emphasizes familial respect and hierarchical relationships, especially in formal communication. Using the patronymic in speech conveys politeness and social distance (*Sergey Ivanovich, Elena Petrovna*).

3. Linguistic and Cultural Features

Russian anthroponyms demonstrate strong **morphological adaptability**. Borrowed names are integrated through phonetic and grammatical adjustment: *George* → *Yegor*, *John* → *Ivan*. Many names have affectionate and diminutive variants used in informal contexts (*Sasha, Masha, Dima, Katya*), expressing warmth and familiarity.

Culturally, names function as **markers of identity**. They can indicate ethnicity, religion, or region. For example, *Rashid* or *Ainur* may suggest Tatar or Bashkir background, while *Stepan* or *Fyodor* sound distinctly Slavic. Naming choices thus reflect not only linguistic preferences but also social belonging and values.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that anthroponyms are deeply embedded in Russia's linguistic and cultural fabric. The evolution of personal names parallels historical transformations—from pagan society to Orthodox Christian identity, imperial modernization, Soviet collectivism, and contemporary globalization.

The Russian naming system stands out for its **balance between stability and change**. While the three-part structure (first name, patronymic, surname) has remained remarkably stable for centuries, the pool of available first names continues to evolve. The persistence of traditional names like *Ivan*, *Elena*, and *Nikolai* demonstrates cultural continuity, whereas the adoption of new names reflects openness and innovation.

Social factors also influence naming. For instance, names popularized by literature (*Tatiana* from Pushkin) or media (*Artem*, *Sofia*) spread quickly among younger generations. Meanwhile, regional and ethnic diversity contributes to the richness of Russian anthroponymy.

From a linguistic perspective, Russian anthroponyms illustrate productive derivation patterns, suffixation (*-ov*, *-ev*, *-in*), and the coexistence of native and borrowed elements. From a cultural perspective, they encapsulate centuries of historical memory and social symbolism.

In the modern era, anthroponyms continue to serve as **symbols of identity** in a globalized world. Naming a child is both a linguistic act and a cultural statement—linking personal choice to collective heritage.

CONCLUSION

Anthroponyms in the Russian language form a complex and dynamic system that unites linguistic, historical, and cultural dimensions. They trace Russia's journey from its Slavic roots through religious transformation and modernization to the globalized present. The persistence of the tripartite naming structure reflects the importance of family and tradition, while the ongoing introduction of new names signals cultural adaptation.

By studying anthroponyms, we gain insight not only into the Russian language but also into the values and worldview of its speakers. Names, as living linguistic signs, continue to bridge the past and the future, preserving memory and shaping identity.



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