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The Origin and Classification of Russian Anecdotes as a Folklore Genre

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The origin and classification of Russian anecdotes as a folklore genre

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Russian anecdotes, the most popular form of Russian humour, are short fictional stories or dialogues with a punch line. It's quite a recent phenomena of Russian folklore and the origin of it is still unclear. Russian anecdotes as a folklore genre became very obvious only in the XX Century. In the XIX Century the word "anecdote" borrowed itself from French meant a short story about some funny event. And even V. Ya. Propp didn't differ folk novelistic stories from anecdotes. Most probably the modern genre of anecdotes is a result of transformation of short novelistic stories from middle-age epoque (in Latin, later in French) under the influence of folk novelistic stories: "Anecdotes were born by shortening and simplification of the topic of folk novelistic stories while retaining main characters" (Yu. I. Yudin, 1976).

Russian anecdotes feature a series of categories with fixed and highly familiar settings and characters. There is endless variety of plots and topics like sex, politics, spouse relations etc. Among the usual archetypes are name characters of famous or fictional people, new Russians, animals, drunkards, policemen, ethnic stereotypes, religion, military, black humour, university students, jokes about disabilities. Through anecdotes Russians express their appinion about their liederes and the situation in the country.

Anecdotes are heard everywhere in Russia and it is quite easy to identify them among other types of folklore prose. Not so clear are anekddotes as a subject of scientific research. First and foremost there is no answer to the question, when and how they originated, which is one of the primary conditions of their correct interpretation as a genre.

The analysis of its name can help to understand the history of anecdotes as a special type of folklore.

Initially, the term anecdotes was used to mark some funny stories about famous people. The Greek word "anekdotos" etymologically means "unpublished", and was used to denote the oral supplements to the written stories, but already in the epoch of N. M. Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin, the meaning of the word «anecdote» narrowed to denote some pleasantry, witty story about something happened to a famous personality. With this meaning the word 'anecdote' existed relatively long (Kurganov).

Therewith the term "anecdote" already in the 18th Century was used to denote also the realistic short stories. For example, a well-known writer-educator of that time V. S Berezaysky published «Anecdotes of Ancient Poshehon People» (Berezaysky). The author born in Yaroslavl region reproduced ironic folk stories about the inhabitants of Poshehon district. As time passed, other folktales-short stories got the name of anecdote. Thus, under the same name different by their origin works were listed - actual anecdote and folktale-short story.

This is a minor form of the comic prose. Among its sources were oral mythological stories about the rogue-trickster, comic doubles of cultural preancestors commonly spread among many peoples. Therewith the boundary that separates the folktale – short story from anecdotes is very fragile. A Russian scientist E. M. Meletinsky, who studied archaic forms of folk prose, admits the existence of transitional forms (folktale-anecdote, anecdotal folktale). He connected the emergence of a folktale-anecdote with the predominance in it of the comic focus, sharpness, paradoxicality, briefness, simplicity of composition (episode or a series of short episodes). (Meletinsky 1986, 174-175; Meletinsky 1990, 8, 20, 22-24).

A proposition was forwarded: «Anecdote is a concentration of the most important elements of short story» (Meletinsky 1990, 5) and there was admission of possibility of «contamination» of different creative sources in it. In fact, these considerations present a long-standing academic tradition not to

separate folktale from anecdote. This tradition was fixed by well-known Aarne-Thompson classification system. (Uther 2004). V.Ya. Propp also didn't differ folktale-short story from anecdote (Propp 1968).

This conception was shared by Yu. P. Yudin, who, in turn, linked the emergence of anecdotes with the previous realistic folktale and noted that anecdote emerged by reduction, shortening and simplifying the plot of realistic folktale while maintaining its characters (Yudin 1986, 81).

The relation between anecdote and novelistic folktale is the undeniable fact, but beyond that there is a link between what has been described as «an anecdote», with a medieval writings and probably it played a more important and perhaps even determining role in the emergence of anecdote as a type of creativity which is different from novelistic folk tale.

In medieval Western Europe, among the people who knew Latin, hand written books were circulated, particularly so called «Roman Stories». This famous collection was compiled using handwritten materials borrowed from writers of the later Rome epoch. With invention of the printing press the collection was printed in Utrecht (1472) and in other Western European cities.

The «Roman Stories» were translated into several languages, including Czech and Polish. Russia acquainted with the book through the Polish version «Historye Rzymskie» which contented the quotations from the Latin original (Polyakova 1980, 341-343), although some short stories were known in Russia before publishing of Polish translation. The composition of the collection changed from one publication to another and was substantially enriched in the 16-17 Centuries, not only owing to the ancient stories, but also to the late ones, sometimes only attributed to Roman antiquities. For example, the collection included a story of unfaithful wife:

During her love affair, a rooster crowed. She asked the servant, what the rooster was singing about. The maid replied: «The rooster said that you inflicted insult to your husband». The wife ordered to slaughter the rooster. Then the second rooster crowed.

According to the interpretation of the housemaid, the rooster said: «My comrade was killed for the words of truth; I am ready to give my life to prove that they are true». And this rooster was slaughtered too. The third rooster crowed. «What he is talking about» - the wife asked the servant. - «The rooster said: you shouldn't tell the truth, if you want to live peacefully». This rooster wasn't slaughtered. (Roman Stories 1877).

This is a typical medieval anecdote, though the story attributed to the time of Emperor Gordionus (3 Century BC). This was done to justify the inclusion of the story under the guise of Ancient Roman story, but its later origin seems certain.

In some cases, the collection includes writings of ancient Roman authors, when they were close by the nature to medieval anecdotes. With reference to Valerius Maximus, the author of Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings (*Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX*) the collection includes a story of Peratinus who mourned his fate:

Alas, Alas me! I have a beautiful, lush tree on which all my three wives hanged themselves. His neighbor Arry ironically said on this subject: I wonder why are you so sad in such circumstances. Be kind, give me three cuts of the tree, and I share them among neighbors: let everyone have a tree on which his wife can hang herself ((Roman Stories 1877, № 14).

Researchers of the minor forms of medieval narrative literature drew attention to the proximity of anecdotes to the French fabliau. As a genre fabliau was formed not only on the basis of the stories borrowed from ancient history, but also on the basis of folktales plots, mostly eastern by origin. The ability of fabliau to be changed and altered easily testifies its autochthonous, i.e., local origins of the genre (Mikhailov 1986, 17-79).

By its themes, images, forms fabliau rooted in national culture. The first samples of fabliau belong to 2 half of 12th Century, and the flourishing of the genre attributes to the 13th Century. V. M Zhirmundsky characterized fabliau as a realistic novelistic story of the medieval cities (Zhirmundsky 1979, 162). One

shouldn't be embarrassed, that it is a verse genre. Fabliau shifting to the field of prose carries the complete loss of the poetic rhythm (Balashov 1982, 338-347).

Fabliau was planted into related kinds and fields of artistic creativity due to the polisemantics of genre (p. 33). Simply speaking, fabliau was easily subjected to alterations, existed in the different kinds and spheres of national satire and humor, although it always kept the witticism of the plot development and the deliberately reduced realistic element (Balashov 1982, 35).

Roman stories and fabliau are related also to prosaic novels *facetiae*. In Russia, *facetiae* appeared in the 17th Century thanks to close contacts of between Russian and Polish cultures (Derzhavina 1962, 11-18).

The renowned scholar Julian Krzyzanowski dated the time of *facetiae* translation into Polish by 16th Century. (Krzyzanowski 1956, 259-312). Both in Poland and Russia, they were adapted to the tastes of readers from the middle class: merchants, civil servants, students. This bookish short story noticeably was losing its belonging to written culture and became closer to folk art. In the 18th Century, translated short stories in Russia acquired a special form of *lubochny* sheets.

Translated short story originally close to the realistic anecdotes, transformed its archetypal model of foregoing comic prose (Mikhailov 1986, 75-82) and created a genre which later got the name of anecdote. Undoubtedly, the genre incorporated a wide range of works: translated novels, folk tales, fables, ironical realistic stories and other witty stories related to them. The multiplicity of the genetic basis made the structure of the emerging genre very complex and it would take time until it found its determining character and unity.

First of all, there was a selection of stories that corresponded to the nature of the emerging genre. Many types of early folk tales – short stories had no difference from the actual anecdote, and had many of its properties. Such is for instance the novelistic folk tale about a thief and a drunkard.

The drunkard heard the noise in his house at night, so a thief and said: "I do not know what you are looking for here at night. Even at the daytime I can not find anything here".

This story differs from the anecdote which appeared later by maxim «Your house will be empty if you are willing to abide drinking» (Derzhavina 1962, 120). This short story which is close to anecdote one can find in the collection of Heinrich Bebel, only it deals with a poor actor:

He caught thieves in his house of a thief and told them the same words: I do not know what you want to find here at night when I am in the light of day can't find anything (Bebel 1970, № 32).

The more extensive was the story, the less it was suitable for the transformation into anecdote. That is, for example, a short story about the priest wife who taught a bear to read.

The angry lord imposed a penalty on a priest and promised to release him from it if he could teach a bear to read. The way out from the situation was found by his wife. She inserted pancakes between book pages and taught a bear to leaf through the book. When the animal used to look for pancakes in that way, she told her husband to bring the bear to his master. A book was put before the bear put – the bear started to leaf it through to look for pancakes. The bear was roaring «mru, mru, mru» - as if was reading. This made the lord to laugh and he saved the priest from punishment.

Although this story is amusing one it has no chance to become an anecdote because it is very extensive. So it remains to be a short story.

The focusation on the semantic element is an important precondition of transformation of a short story to become an anecdote. This embodies a paradoxical assertion or denial of some known truth.

Slowly but steadily, there was formed a collection of witty stories of special formation which became anecdotes. Anecdotes differ from the folk tales, short stories and other minor narrative forms by the fact that it is a story (usually one-event or even one-motive) with exaggerated comic life circumstances disclosed at the very end through a sudden move or unexpected plot twist or plot situation. The special feature of anecdotes is its strong (witty) ending (Sokolov

1938, 341). Without such ending anecdote as a genre does not exist. The development of the story internally, structurally gradually prepares the artistic effect, based on the implementation of different techniques from a mere exaggeration or minimization of life events to the approval or denial of some thoughts, often - through a grotesque reproduction of reality (Anikin 2001, 707).

This definition is correspondent with the definition of Ya. Zundelovich, who wrote in *Literaturnaya Encyclopedia*: Anecdote (in its final form) is a minor narrative form, which is based on the expressive and sharply outlined situation which seeks the resolution and found it in a strictly closed end» (Zundelovich 1930, 162-164).

In folklore anecdote due to its particular genetic relationship to a literary one there is a trend to combine separate stories about the characters, but not historical, as in literary anecdotes, but exclusively belonging to the artistic types of folklore origin. Jokes form cycles: such are contemporary anecdotes about lieutenant Rzhevsky¹, Chukchi², Vovochka³, Chapaev, his aide-de-camp Petyka⁴, and Stirlitz⁵ etc.

¹ **Rzhevsky** is a cavalry officer. In the aristocratic setting of high-society balls and 19th century social sophistication, Rzhevsky, famous for brisk but not very smart remarks, keeps ridiculing the decorum with his vulgarities. Kniaz Andrei Bolkonski asks Poruchik Rzhevsky: "Tell me, Poruchik, how did you come to be so good with the ladies? What is your secret?" - "It's quite *simplement, mon Prince*, quite *simplement*. I just come over and say: 'Madame, may I stick it into you?'" - "But Poruchik, you'll get slapped in the face for that!" - "*Oui*, you may be slapped in, but many of them got stucked in!"

² **Chukchi**, the native people of Chukotka, the most remote northeast corner of Russia, are the most common minority targeted for generic ethnic jokes in Russia. A Chukcha comes into a shop and asks: "Do you have color TVs?" "Yes, we do." "Give me a green one."

³ **Vovochka** is the Russian equivalent of Little Johnny and a diminutive form of Vladimir, creating the "little boy" effect. His fellow students bear similarly diminutive names. This "little boy" name is used in contrast with Vovochka's wisecracking, adult, often obscene statements. The teacher asks the class to produce a word that starts with the letter "A"; Vovochka happily raises his hand and says "Asshole!" The teacher, shocked, responds "For shame! There's no such word!" "That's strange," says Vovochka, "the asshole exists, but the word doesn't!" Since the election of Vladimir Putin, all jokes about Vovochka are considered political.

⁴ **Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev** is a Red Army hero of the Russian Civil War, in the rank of Division Commander, was featured in a hugely popular 1934 biopic. Other characters from the biopic like his aide-de-

Anecdotes are united also in thematic groups, through the use of ornamental-compositional principle: such are questions and answers of Armenian Radio⁶, using of cartoons endings "Just await!" etc. Traditionally, realistic anecdotes are comic situations involving relationships between mother-in-law and son-in-law, unfaithful wife and husband (once a husband returned from his business trip) and others. Other topics are anecdotes about the conflict side of military service⁷, anecdotes from Odessa, relationship between doctors and patients. There is quite a number of the so-called criminal jokes, jokes about New Russians⁸ (Borodin 2001), political anecdotes relating the deeds and the characteristics of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, politicians of our time⁹.

camp Petyka, Anka The Machine-Gunner, and political commissar Furmanov, all based on real people, are also featured in the jokes.

⁵ **Standartenführer Stirlitz**, alias Colonel Isayev is a character from the Soviet TV series "Seventeen Moments of Spring", based on a novel by Yulian Semyonov about a fictional Soviet intelligence officer who infiltrates Nazi Germany. Stirlitz opened a door. The lights went on. Stirlitz closed the door. The lights went out. Stirlitz opened the door again. The light went back on. Stirlitz closed the door. The light went out again. "It's a fridge," concluded Stirlitz.

⁶ Fictitious **Armenian Radio**, usually telling political jokes. Many jokes are based on word play, often combined with the usage of Southern accent and consequent misunderstanding between the characters. This is Armenian Radio; our listeners asked us: "What is the difference between the Constitutions of the USA and USSR?" Both guarantee freedom of speech." We're answering: "Yes, but the Constitution of the USA also guarantees freedom after the speech."

⁷ In these jokes a *praporschik* (warrant officer) is an archetypal bully of limited wit. *Scene One*: A tree. An apple. An ape comes and starts to shake the tree. A voice from above: "Think, **think!**" The ape thinks, grabs a stick, and hits the apple off. *Scene Two*: A tree. An apple. A *praporschik* comes and starts to shake the tree. A voice from above: "Think, **think!**" - "No time to think, gotta shake!"

⁸ **New Russians**, i.e. the nouveau-riche, arrogant and poorly educated post-perestroika businessmen and gangsters, are a new and very popular category of characters in contemporary Russian jokes. "Daddy, all my schoolmates are riding bus, and I am the black sheep in this 600 Merc." - "No worries, son. I'll buy you a bus, and you'll ride like everyone else!"

⁹ Vladimir Putin goes to bed one evening and Stalin appears to him in a dream. Putin asks Stalin for some help with the state of Russian economy, crime, etc... Stalin says: "Round up and shoot every male between the age of 21 & 30 and then paint the inside of the Kremlin blue."

Putin asks: "Why blue?"

Stalin retorts: "I knew you would ask me about the second part first"

Thematic cycles of anecdotes often use similar methods of re-establishment of comic situations. The most frequently used are the following techniques and structural approaches:

1. Exaggeration of ridiculous situations (figurative hyperbole). Such are the storylines in many anecdotes about Chapaev and Petyka. These anecdotes follow in the tradition of the typical folk stories deliberately showing the lack of knowledge of the heroes in the simplest things.

Samogonka is on the table, but there are no snacks. Petyka is angry: Vasily Ivanovich, I boil eggs twenty minutes, but they are still hard. Chapaev said: Okay, get it out! Perhaps they are from the old chicken (Anecdotes 1998, 3).

2. Exaggerated minimization of the figurative reproduction of reality (figurative litotes). Usual mode in anecdotes dystrophy patients:

There is a conversation in the hospital ward. One patient says: Petya, roll a pill. - Why Petya? Let Ivanov roll it. He is strong (Anecdotes from Nikulin, 106).

3. Exaggeration or understatement can take the form of caricature related to some imaginative detail, complete fullishness. Anecdote about locomotive drivers.

One driver asked the other: What kind of wood do you throw into the furnace? - Direct. - Now drop curved wood - we will turn (Anecdotes 1998, 166).

4. Figurative paradox can take the form of a parody:

Grandfather planted (imprisoned) Turnip. Turnip was released from prison and killed the old man. (Criminal jokes, 214).

5. The comic can be a grotesque, when the anecdotic story complitly becomes incredible:

A hen has laid an egg of 5 kilograms. A journalist came and asked: How did you manage it? - A secret. - Your plans for the future? - To lay an egg of seven kilograms. The journalist asked the rooster: How did you manage it? - A secret. - What are your future plans? - To smash ostriches face in (Lomovie Anecdotes, 266).

6. Grotesque fantasy may take the form of absolute fiction, in which the irony triumphs over the infinite human stupidity and a typical folklore fool can be easily replaced by another fool.

One friend dropped in at another and saw him playing chess with a dog.

-A smart dog - said the guest. - But I am winning: 3-2 (Anecdotes about Animals, 171).

7. Wit of many jokes is based on polysemy of words.

The son returned from school and said to his father: - Dad, I got four. - Put it in the refrigerator (Anecdotes from Nikulin, 80).

Four in the father mind is only a quarter of vodka.

8. Unexpected effects may occur in the case, when a figurative meaning of words is replaced by direct meaning.

Two friends are talking. -My wife is an angel. - You are lucky. Mine is still alive (Anecdotes from Nikulin, 137).

9. Figurative paradox as a mode in anecdotes suggests replacing the circumstances under which the ratio of the reasonable and unreasonable things changes. Such is, for example, the pathetic situation in which the wife learns that her husband has a mistress.

In the theater, where the colleagues of the husband met, the wife asked him to show his mistress. He started from afar:

-Look, it is our Chief and his wife, and there - his mistress. And there is our accountant, and close to him is his mistress ...

The wife is impatient: - Well, where is yours? - She sits in the box. You see that blond woman? - And the wife decides: "Oh, our is the best! (Lomovie Anecdotes, 142).

The final comment eliminates incompatibility of natural assessments; the logic of a different situation prevails: a distorted sense of family pride is above her husband's conviction.

In anecdote as a special genre of folklore we can denote the primacy of the course of wit thoughts over the choice of characters as an object of comic

mockery. Anecdote allows substitution of characters and descriptive subject, but keeps with the traditional structure which gives the comic effect. For example, such is the anecdote about astronauts:

In 1969, after Americans landing on the moon the Soviet leader Khrushchev called two astronauts and said:

-Tomorrow we'll shake the world, you will be launched to the sun.

But we will melt there.

-Do not be afraid. Our Communist party thought it all over. You will be launched at night.

The same anecdote I heard recently in Malaysia. But Khrushchev was replaced by Abdullah Badawi and the Communist Party by the Party UMNO.

The priority of the process of thinking over its subject-thematic content often leads to a renewal of situations well known in the literature - in particular, the fables and folk-tale themes. Anecdote gives them a new comic face.

A fox running through the forest saw a crow sitting on a tree and having in the mouth a piece of cheese. - Hello, crow. Do you know that we have subbotnik (voluntary work on Saturday) today? The crow shifted cheese in its beak and nodded. - Do you know that tomorrow we have voskresnik (voluntary work on Sunday). - How? - croaked the crow and a piece of cheese fell down (Lomovie Anecdotes, 249).

The creators of anecdotes like updating fabulous situation, give them modern interpretations:

A wolf knocks on the door to kids and said, as in the fairy tale:

-Dear kids, open the door, your mother came and brought milk ...

And in response it heard:

-Get out of here ... Drink milk yourself. As for our mother we sent her to bring beer for us (Lomovie Anecdotes, 14).

Anecdote as a genre of oral tradition continues to exist in different strata of modern society (among students, schoolchildren, workers, and peasants). There is interaction of it with various types of genres but this interaction needs further researches.

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