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Cover design by Nick Brown / Cover concept by Igor E. Klyukanov

Russian Journal of Communication is published by MARQUETTE BOOKS LLC, 3107 East 62nd Avenue, Spokane, Washington 99223 509-443-7047 voice • 509-448-2191 fax www.MarquetteJournals.org • books@marquettejournals.org
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INTRODUCTION

THE RUSSIAN ANEKDOT AS CULTURAL GENRE,
DISCOURSE AND PERFORMANCE

WILLIAM GRAVES III AND VLADIMIR KARASIK

Wings for the soul, lessons for the heart, rituals of solidarity (and rebellion), the Russian anekdot is a primary speech genre that has long played, and continues to play, an important role in the production and transformation of both individual and collective understandings of subjectivity and identity in Russian speech communities.

In everyday expressions of such concerns, “знаешь анекдот?... (Do you know the anekdot?...) and “…это точно так, как в анекдоте…” (...it is exactly like the anekdot...) are just the types of routine, well-rehearsed discourse structures that strategically frame key claims to solidarity and intimacy. Thus framed, the anekdot indexes broader realms of meaning and significance; and, in so doing, it enjoins the interlocutors and audience to reflect upon, to imagine and, indeed, to comment upon (and, perhaps, to dispute) the “aptness” of the anekdot for understanding “Our Life” (наша жизнь).

The anekdot may work for the participants, as many theorists of humor have argued, by presenting an incongruity, contradiction or paradox, which is then dramatically resolved in the “punch-line.” Or it may work, much as metaphor does, by creatively juxtaposing quite distinct semantic domains in such a manner that the participants reach new insights into familiar events, situations or characters. Whether a matter of the resolution of incongruities or the revelation of novel insights, the efficacy of the anekdot is fundamentally a cooperative, interactional accomplishment.

By introducing the anekdot in this way as a communicative act embedded in larger structures of discourse, we are not denying the importance of understanding the anekdot as a specific genre positioned within a much broader field of genres of joke lore and humor that include, among other forms, “chastushki,” (частушки) “stishki,” (стишки) “baiki,” (байки) “афоризмы,” (афоризмы) “karikatury” (карикатуры). However, we have chosen to devote
this special issue of the Russian Journal of Communication to diverse perspectives on anekdot, rather than humor or Russian jokelore in general, precisely because we are claiming a privileged position for anekdot in the communicative economy of Russian speech communities of the past and the present, local and transnational, interpersonal and mediated.

We believe the veritable explosion of edited collections of anekdots published since the mid 1990s (in Russia and abroad), the continuing popularity of columns dedicated to anekdots in Russian-language print media and, perhaps most tellingly, the unmistakable prominence of anekdots, evaluations of anekdots and discussions of anekdots throughout Ru net cyberspace all provide ample justification for the focus of this special issue.

This, in itself, would seem to be enough, but there are, in our view, other compelling reasons for devoting an entire special issue to anekdots. One reason is to encourage a more robust multidisciplinary approach to empirical studies of the diverse roles anekdots play in ongoing processes of social, cultural and linguistic change today. For one thing, we would like to see future studies of anekdots that build upon the kinds of richly contextualized insights into language, discourse and change during the late-socialist period to be found in such ethnographic accounts as Reis (1997) and Yurchak (2006). For another, we would like to encourage a sustained, scholarly dialogue across disciplines and, more importantly, across national academic traditions. As we think all of the contributions to this special issue clearly indicate, students of language, culture and communication everywhere have much to gain by doing just that.

Another reason for devoting an entire special issue to anekdots is to counter a general tendency, most evident in the English-language literatures, to privilege the political satiric functions of anekdots (and other forms of humor), thus shifting attention away from critical consideration of other functions and meanings of anekdots in the past and in the present. Part of this is related to a more focused interest in satire in humor studies today, yet a far more important part of the problem is the implicit or explicit view of anekdots as the canonical form of everyday resistance to authority, especially “popular” resistance to the hegemonic ideals, practices and institutions of the former Soviet State during the late-socialist period (although Graham (2003) represents an important counterexample to this general perspective).

As several of the contributions to this special issue clearly show, the anekdot as genre and as performance was not born in the Soviet Union and it certainly did not die with the Soviet Union. Instead, as pervasive public and private commentary on the many faces of humor, irony and absurdity in “daily life” (день) makes quite clear, the anekdot has come to fill a much more prominent communicative space in the post-socialist public sphere and to demonstrate a much broader range of themes, characters, social functions and intertextual resonances than ever before.

Given the particular focus of this special issue, we have resisted imposing a strict categorization on the nine papers in this volume, for all of them do share a common interest
in exploring the specificity of the anekdot as genre, as register and as a discourse structure with specific functions and diverse meanings. Nevertheless, there is an implicit sub-categorization reflected in the relative ordering of these papers that follows from what we see as important differences in emphasis and approach in each of the papers.

The first three papers by the Shmelevs, Tiupa and Dementyev all share a common interest in the linguistic and stylistic characteristics of anekdot. The Shmelevs make the case that the anekdot is a unique Russian oral genre, most recognizable as such through the use of distinctive discourse markers, syntactic structures and morphological markers of “depictive” performance, rather than “narrative” description. Pragmatically and semantically, according to the Shmelevs, linguistic analysis of the anekdot reveals an important historical shift from historical narrative to rich cultural performance.

Building explicitly on Bakhtin’s analysis of the anekdot as a primary speech genre underlying and motivating the development of many modern literary forms, Tiupa combines historical overview with a phenomenological analysis of the stylistic characteristics of both archaic and modern forms of anekdot. Tiupa argues for an understanding of anekdot in its essence as an open-ended dialogic encounter between “equal individuals.” Mediating between “myth” and “literature,” the anekdot is structured and keyed to “entertain,” rather than “captivate, overcome or suppress” listeners and audiences.

Finally, in a close linguistic analysis of anekdots published in the official satirical journal “Krokodil” during the 1970s, Dementyev explores the specific syntactic, semantic and stylistic structures employed by the journal’s editorial staff to redefine the anekdot as a written genre that served didactic ends. According to Dementyev, this created, in essence, a diglossic situation designed to undermine the vitality and credibility of the anekdot as a popular speech genre.

The papers by Kozintsev and Sheygal-Placzek direct our attention to the complex, and much-contested matter of the functions served by the anekdot. Kozintsev’s paper provocatively sounds the perils of interpretation by challenging the quite common practice of common-sense, decontextualized content analysis of anekdots. Taking on the seemingly self-evident series of “Stalin Jokes” so often treated as documentary evidence of political attitudes, Kozintsev argues that such jokes are not satirical attacks on the object (Stalin) at all, but satirical attacks by the “superior” author on the “inferior” implied narrator of the joke. Jokes are parodic copies of other jokes; however, satire operates at the metacommunicative level in joking performances.

On the other hand, Sheygal-Placzek’s paper takes up a strongly opposed perspective on political anekdots. Choosing as her corpus of political anekdots a relatively new series featuring Putin and Medvedev, Sheygal-Placzek argues that satirical attacks on political leaders have a clear didactic function. Following Bakhtin’s own analysis of the carnivalesque in Rabelais, Sheygal-Placzek argues that such political anekdots represent a stylized
“profanation of the sacred” that functions to reinforce the very virtues being violated in the political anekdots.

The final set of four papers by Kozin, Kashkin and Shilikhina, Yelenevskaya and Karasik explore various aspects of the cultural and social meaning of anekdots. In a suggestive deployment of Vladimir Propp’s theory of comic exaggeration to frame visual caricature as a species of anekdot, Kozin applies basic principles of the ethnography of communication to argue that the typical comic reading of “bureaucrat cartoons” published in “Krokodil” in Soviet and post-Soviet times was both an expression of and enabled by stable cultural attitudes towards the figure of the “bureaucrat” as “vain and indifferent, vacuous, inept, and devoid of a true self.”

Kashkin and Shilikhina’s paper explores the narrative structure of anekdot, drawing our attention to the different ways in which this speech genre orients interlocutors to “behavioral stereotypes” and, thus, conveys a variety of social meanings critical to group identification. According to Kashkin and Shilikhina, in-group performances of anekdot function to maintain “group values” through performative distanciation from negative stereotypes, while out-group performances function to enhance “self-esteem.”

In a very different approach to the meaning of “group values,” Yelenevskaya explores the discursive roles of “baiki,” claimed (auto)biographical narratives, and anekdots in the construction of computer-mediated transnational Russian communities. “Baiki” and anekdots serve as powerful vehicles for constructing stable images of “Ours Abroad” while helping members articulate and resolve the ambivalence and incongruities of experiences of integration and acculturation in different host countries.

Karasik’s rich socio-semantic analysis of the anekdot cycle about “New Russians” goes beyond the typical thematic analyses of anekdot cycles by exploring how different social positions and different cultural attitudes toward wealth and power can motivate quite different responses to these ostensibly satiric attacks on the new “class” in post-socialist Russia. Once more, we are reminded of the importance of contextualized, socially positioned interpretations of the anekdot, informed by a critical, theoretical understanding of anekdot as a performative genre.

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COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGY OF THE ANEKDOT AND THE GENESIS OF LITERARY GENRES

VALERII TIUPA

The article deals with the anekdot as a literary genre. The author believes it belongs to a group of several most important narrative discourses that are archaic in nature. He explores the origins and historical development of the modern anekdot. The article focuses on the structural and stylistic features of the genre, and analyzes different examples of it, as well as its precursors, in Russian and world literature and culture. The communicative strategy of the anekdot is closely studied.

Keywords: anekdot, literary genre, communicative strategy, communicative event, world view, rhetoric, Mikhail Bakhtin, literary character, narrator, addressee

In my discussion of the communicative strategy of the anekdot, I am using Mikhail Bakhtin’s metalinguistic concept of “speech genres.” Very generally put, every speech genre is a “typical form of utterance” (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 191) which corresponds to “typical situations of verbal communication,” with its inherent “subject” and “purpose” of talking or writing. The communicative purpose is “the appeal, the addressedness... without which there is no and cannot be an utterance. The different typical forms of such appeal and the different typical concepts of addressees are the constitutive and defining particularities of different speech genres” (Bakhtin, 1996, pp. 204-205). Bakhtin has always emphasized this communicative element: “It is how the speaker (or the writer) perceives and imagines his addressees and what their impact on the utterance is, that the composition, and even more so—the style—of the utterance depend on.” (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 200).

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Thus, a genre is a certain mutual conventionality of communication, a communicative strategy which unites the subjects and the addressee of utterances in their relation to the topic of the speech. Any speech genre (not only the literary ones) is characterized by its constituents: the object reference (the typical view of the world and the genre “character type”), the “form of authorship” as the subject’s “speech mask” necessary for generating the text of this type, and the “concept of addressee.”

The anekdot belongs to a group of several most important narrative discourses that are archaic in nature. Similar to a tale, legend and parable, not included into belles-lettres per se, but situated in the gap between the stages of myth and literature, the anekdot carries within itself a certain communicative strategy that has played a principal role in the forming of a number of literary genres.

The anekdot and parable are especially close, as they are both short proto-literary narratives (the latter is, however, diametrically opposite to anekdot because of its genre strategy). They are similar in the condensation of the described situation, in the compactness of the plot, the laconic exactness of composition, the unexpandedness of characterizations and descriptions, the accentuated role of a few magnified details, and the brevity and preciseness of verbal expression. They are also similar in their origin; they are both “asteroid-like” genre formations that appear on the oral periphery of the fundamental written contexts of culture. For a parable, it is the context of religion and the corresponding sacral books, for the anekdot—the context of monumental historiography. In Greek and Roman antiquity, official hypomnematic (reference) biographies of historical figures usually included a list of anecdotes about them.

Good examples of this are the many anecdotes about Alexander the Great that capture the beginning of the “private way of life” which realizes the “ideal of the new individualism” (Averintsev 1973, p. 163). One of the most popular anecdotes is the story about how Alexander the Great approached Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher, who was lying on the ground, and asked whether he wanted anything. “Yes,” answered Diogenes. “I would have you stand from between me and the sun.” As he went away, Alexander told his followers, “If I were not Alexander, I would choose to be Diogenes.”

Subsequently, the anekdot (as well as another asteroid genre, parable) separated from the context that produced it, is used in different communicative situations and is “connected to texts that belong to (different — V.T.) spheres of both oral and written art” (Kurganov, 1997, p. 25). However, this does not make us, as it does Efim Kurganov, see the anekdot as a “sort of sub-genre,” which “does not have its own genre space, cannot function on its own and cannot exist only as anekdot.” It is quite common that a short, non-committal conversation between two people who know each other well reduces itself to just telling of a new anekdot.

The best-known collectors of anecdotes in the history of the genre were the Byzantine court historian, Procopius of Caesarea (6th century), and the figure of the Italian
Renaissance, Poggio Bracciolini (15th century). The former, parallel to his official work on the fundamental *The Wars of Justinian*, was secretly documenting “the scandalous chronicle of the Constantinopolitan court that was full of the worst antigovernment anecdotes and gossip which were passed from mouth to mouth by Justinian’s subjects” (Averintsev 1984, p. 345). The emperor’s image was distinctly split into two — “the face” and “the backing.” “In the official tractates, he was the wise father of his subjects and the great creator of the Christian nation, but in *The Secret History*—a sadist, a devil incarnate, who has surrounded himself with scoundrels and married the most debauched of women.” It is this “backing” of the official historiography that had been called “Anecdota” which means “not for publication.”

Almost a thousand years later, Bracciolini, as secretary of the Roman Curia, secretly recorded curious stories told by visitors, often obtained by eavesdropping. Many of his notes collected in *The Facetiae* contained comical information about the private lives of famous people of that time. The ‘facetiae,’ meaning jokes or witticisms, were significantly influenced by the novella form, which by then had existed in Italy for about 100 years. ‘Facetiae’ became the prototype of the urban anecdote in its contemporary sense.

In Russia in 1764, Pyotr Semyonov published “a collection of good words, rational schemes, quick answers, courteous ridicules and pleasant adventures of the famous men from old and modern times” titled *The Sensible and Fanciful Comrade*. The subtitle quite fit the first definition of the word “anecdotes” given in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)—as not yet published secret story from the private life of an official (see Cuddon, 1999, p. 39).

Pushkin understood this genre in the same way. He collected amusing stories from his contemporaries’ lives in *Table-talk* and wrote in *Eugene Onegin*: “But the anekdots from the days gone by / From Romulus’ times to modern day / He kept in his memory.” By the 1830s in Russian literature, anecdote takes a distinct place as a rhetorical (extra-artistic) genre. According to Nikolai Koshansky, it is an “impartial” narrative about “something that happened.” “The contents of the anecdote are usually a clever phrase or an unusual action. Its purpose is to explain a character, to show a trait of a certain virtue (or sometimes a sin), or to describe a curious case” (Koshanskii, 1832, pp. 59, 65).

The modern understanding of the anecdote as joke, ridicule, an imagined scenario involving historical figures or conventional character types is not quite appropriate for the proposed study of the genre strategy. The phenomena of modern urban folklore are created and exist under the significant reverse influence from comic literature. However, here we are talking about the communicative strategy of the genre in question in its more archaic form, which had played a specific and significant role in the formation of literary genres.

Not distinguishing between the anecdotal narrative in its proto-literary and post-literary form leads Efim Kurganov to his disputable definition of the origin of the anecdot. “The genre crystallization of the anecdot, according to the author of the first Russian
monograph on this cultural phenomenon, was a result of its slow, gradual hiving off from the whole complex of genres, fundamental differences between which were not always distinctly felt. It could even be said that the anekdot originally appeared and existed in a special genre field among the components of which could be distinguished a fable, an apologue, a parable and an epigram”; “that the anekdot absorbed (...) the line of fable, that it is its offshoot” (Kurganov, 1997, pp. 39, 42). This cannot be said about Procopius of Caesarea’s anecdotes. As Sergey Averintsev demonstrates, the Byzantine literature of the first centuries A.D. did not have such a “genre field.” As for the epigram, the main lyric genre of Justinian’s time, it was a highly stylized form of elegant nature, differing essentially from the anecdotal epigrams of the modern European poetry, particularly the poetry of Pushkin’s time.

Let us demonstrate this point with two examples from Pushkin’s Table-talk, which are different in nature, yet the same from the genre point of view, as common genre examples of the anekdot:

Potemkin would often feel blue. He would sit alone day after day, not letting anybody in, and do absolutely nothing. One day, when he was in such state, there were a lot of papers piling up that needed his immediate attention, but nobody would dare to enter his chamber. Young officer Petushkov who had heard everything offered to take the papers to the Prince to be signed. He was gladly given the papers, and everybody waited impatiently to see what would come out of it. Petushkov went straight to the Prince’s chamber with the papers. Potemkin was sitting there deep in thought, wearing a robe, barefoot, biting his nails. Petushkov bravely told him what the matter was and put the papers in front of him. Potemkin silently picked up the pen and signed all the papers, one after another. Petushkov bowed and went out looking triumphant: “He signed!” Everybody ran to him and saw that the papers were indeed signed. They began to congratulate Petushkov: “Well done, to be sure!” But then somebody looked into the signature and—what do you think? On every paper, instead of “Prince Potemkin” it read “Petushkov,” “Petushkov,” “Petushkov.”

Delvig was once offering Ryleev to go to a brothel together. “I’m married,” answered Ryleev. “And?” said Delvig, “Can you not have dinner at a restaurant just because you have a kitchen at home?”

As we can see, the anekdot was a “story describing a private event in the life of a historical figure, an amusing episode, a witty phrase, etc.” (Petrovskii, col. 52). It could cause not only a sneer, but also marvel or surprise; it could be a conjecture, a gossip, or a false rumor, but it always had to do with an actual person—even if not a famous figure, still an actual historical person (somebody famous, eminent, widely known). It is in this meaning that the word “anekdot” is used by Pushkin in The Tales of Belkin (the publisher’s note says:
“There follows the anekdot which we are not going to quote here for we believe it to be unnecessary; however we assure our reader that it does not contain anything offensive to the memory of Ivan Petrovich Belkin”), or in The Queen of Spades (“And the Countess told her anekdot to her grandson for the hundredth time”). If a parable view of the world appears atemporal and imperative (as is essential to this genre, only one of the character’s possible choices will comply with the moral imperatives of the world), then the view of the world of the classic anekdot is “carnivalized” contemporaneity, private life as a game of chance, where even a socially important person acts as a proactive subject of extra-role behavior.

The art of writing, in the course of its development, acquired the ability of creating images of exceptional individual brightness. However, this was achieved fully only in the era of the classic novel. At the early stages of literary evolution the hero is not yet personalistic, originally quite schematic, and resembles in this quality characters of a tale or a parable. It is through anekdot that human individuality carries over into the sphere of the verbal culture, which neighbors with literature, and later—into literature. But this is not yet the “fictional,” imagined individuality; it is a borrowed individuality taken directly from real life. For the anekdot to exist and function fully, it is necessary for the narrator and the audience of this curious narration to know well, or at least, be able to imagine the hero clearly in his live distinctness.

This is the reason why “the anekdots from the days gone by” kept by Onegin’s memory are essentially dead, like a collection of dead butterflies, because in their perception there is no longer “a zone of familiar contact” (Bakhtin) with the current reality of “our days” in its incompleteness. (Here we are rephrasing the Bakhtinian characterization of an image of a novel whose historical roots can be found, in particular, in the anecdotal layer of culture.) The nature of the genre in question is such that its full existence as a cultural phenomenon is possible “only as part of the situation in which it was uttered,” as Efim Kurganov justly noted (Kurganov, 1997, p. 8).

A classic anekdot with its attention to unique, often curious manifestations of the individual (not typal), human character, is a much later phenomenon than a parable. However, it is also very ancient in origin. The Graeco-Roman antiquity has preserved numerous amusing stories from the lives of famous philosophers, military commanders, orators, and poets. In Greek rhetoric, skillful oral narration of such a story was called chreia (from the Greek chrao ‘I announce’). The art of telling is still one of the constructive characteristics of this genre: a poorly told anekdot does not achieve its effect and, essentially, does not become the anekdot per se as a communicative event of a special kind. Meanwhile, an artless narration of a legend, tale, or a parable spoils, but does not ruin these utterances in their genre distinctness.

Moreover, the skillfulness of the narrator is more important for the anekdot than believability. For the sake of vividness and showiness, it possesses a “genre right” to distortion and exaggeration. But the plot of a classic anekdot (unlike that of the modern oral
“facetiae”) claims to be true. “The anecdote could be unbelievable, strange, and unusual, but its claim to be true is absolutely unshakable... no matter how unrealistic it might seem” (Kurganov, 1997, p. 10). However, this is just the narrator’s mindset. The appropriate listener’s reaction is surprise, i.e. doubting the truthfulness of the story, not complete acceptance, but which is compensated by the amusement of the effect achieved.

The anecdotal effect is not necessarily comical. The comical, which prevails in this genre (and which is unacceptable in a legend or a parable, and possible in a tale, but only in a certain type of it), is the result of its main effect: the effect of paradoxicality which Kurganov cleverly describes as “stripping, undressing the reality, breaking free from the fetters of etiquette” (Kurganov, 1997, p. 25).

The genre situation of the telling of the anecdote does not require from the speech subject veritable knowledge; the status of anecdotal thematic/semantic content is a subjective, but noteworthy opinion (which is especially obvious in anecdotes about political figures). This strategic moment is inherent not only to fictional anecdotal stories—discreditable or apologetic—but also to nonfictional ones. Even being factually accurate sometimes, they exist as hearsay and rumors, i.e. belong to the very situation of telling and not to the axiologically distanced (as in a legend) situation that is being narrated.

The anecdote is the first speech genre in the history of literature to make a private opinion, an original view, or a curious word a cultural asset. Anecdotal stories are valuable not because of the authenticity of their report or their profundity of thought, but because of their very unobtrusive informality, their alternative to doxa (popular opinion). This is exactly what allows on a certain stage of cultural development to record and collect them, and to publish what is not meant for publication. This genre impulse has played a significant role in the establishing of modern literature.

An anecdotal narrative, which tells about something not necessarily funny, but necessarily curious (interesting, amusing, engaging, unexpected, unlikely, unprecedented), creates an occasional (accidental) view of the world, which with its “carnivalesque” invertedness and its curious unexpectedness rejects, distorts, and profanes the etiquette norms of human interactions. The anecdote cancels the ethical or political imperativity with its relativity. It does not accept the world order per se; life in anecdot’s view is a game of chance, the unpredictable concatenation of circumstances, the interaction of individual initiatives. Because the anecdote shows unique, historically peripheral situations of private life, the world here is the arena for the collision of individual wills, where the character is the subject of self-identification in the unpredictable game of chance.

The genre form of the character in the anecdot is an individual personality as a curious case of being. The anecdotal event consists in self-discovery of this personality, which is the result of the initiative-adventurous behavior in an occasional-adventurous world, the behavior that is wittily resourceful or, to the contrary, discreditably foolish, or simply quizzical, wacky, or blasphemous. The features that Bakhtin saw in connection with the
initial form of a novelette as a literary genre are already present in the anekdot: “discreditation, verbal profanity, and indecency. The “unusual” in a novelette is the breaking of the taboo, the profanation of the sacred. Novelette is a nocturnal genre that discredits the dead sun” (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 41).

The significant dependence of the success of the anekdot, not so much on the content but mostly on the skillfulness of the teller, is represented in the crucial compositional role of its pointe, which is a sudden transformation of the situation as a result of the change of the point of view. It is the pointe that has to be skillfully, compositionally, intonationally, and lexically prepared, and effectively implemented by the teller.

If a purely monological word of a parable possesses “compulsory seriousness” (Bakhtin) and is authoritative in the allegorical depth of its parabolic character, then the occasional word of the anekdot is an initiative word, curious in its unprecedentedness, always ready to get involved into a game of meanings or unexpected consonance or assonance. The genre limit to which the anekdot could be easily reduced (like a parable could be reduced to a maxim) is a comical apothegm, that is a joke that is kept in the cultural memory (or an inverted joke: a folly, something inappropriate, a mistake, or a slip of tongue), in which a word is deritualized and has personal nature.

The genre speech mask of the anekdot is the rhetoric of an occasional-situational dialogized word of direct speech. It is the character dialogue (organized, however, in a narrative-epic, and not a theatrical manner) which is usually plot-generating here. Also, the text of the anekdot itself (for example, word choice) depends significantly on the actual dialogic situation of the telling, which is directly focused on the anticipated, and organized by the teller reaction of the listener(s). Preliminary familiarization of the listeners with the content of the anekdot is unacceptable either for the teller, or for the audience: it destroys the communicative situation of this genre. That is the reason why the anekdot could not be told to oneself, while a parable possibly could—by remembering and comparing its content to one’s own situation of choice.

If a parable constitutes a communicative situation of monologic agreement between the hierarchically distanced edifier and the edified, then the anekdot is a situation of dialogic agreement (in particular, the laughing one) of the equal individuals. Anekdot as a speech act assumes that the teller and the listeners share a common horizon, a mutual confidence in the communication and the acriatic (ungoverned) equality of the interacting consciousnesses. That is why the existence of hierarchical relations between the subject and the addressee of such communication (a boss is telling the anekdot to an employee) in itself becomes a subject of an anecdotal ridicule.

The listener of the anekdot must possess a certain receptive characteristic—a special kind of non-regulated competence that presupposes the presence of so-called sense of humor and the ability to cast aside the “compulsory seriousness” of existence. The mutual alternativity of individual consciousnesses that is postulated by the anekdot presupposes the
addressee to have his own opinion, as well as the initiative/playing position of co-creation. The anekdot is not supposed to captivate the listeners, overcoming and suppressing their inner isolation, but to entertain them, offering the addressee the freedom to evaluate the communicated.

By becoming familiar with the inside-out aspect of reality demonstrated by the anekdot, the listener is transported to the new position of values and meaning: he transcends the limits of the customary, standard orientation in the world and achieves inner freedom. In this we find the catharsis of laughter, whose genre-generating role is still seen in such literary successors of the anekdot as the epigram and vaudeville.

In Russian literature of the 19th century the anekdot itself for a short time (approximately from 1820s to 1860s) acquires the status of a full-fledged literary genre, one of the classics of which should be named Ivan Gorbunov, whose curious The Scenes (from peasants’ life, from merchants’ life, from city life), in part The Monologues, and The Imitation of Ancient Script turned out to be significant forerunners of the early works by Chekhov. The name of one of his first published works is noteworthy—Simply an Occurrence (1855). Having refused the initial laconism of the anekdot, but keeping its genre strategy, especially the poetics of the occasional-dialogic word, Gorbunov creates amusing texts of documentary authenticity, which are sometimes similar to the genre of a comic play, and sometimes to the genre of a short story. But the comical situations and remarks in these scenes are characterized by autotelic significance, without claiming to be parabolic and deep in meaning. Subsequently, the anekdots of this type are forced out of literature by vaudevilles and short stories, going back to its initial laconism and becoming one of the main genres of urban folklore.

The historical productivity of its genre strategy turned out very high. The anekdot’s role in the formation of the system of literary genres consists, first of all, in that in any situation it sees an opportunity for “completely different value/meaning worldview, with completely different borders between things and values, and different organization. It is this perception that makes up the necessary background for the novelistic outlook, image, and word. This possibility of the new includes also a possibility of a different language, a possibility of a different intonation or evaluation, and of different spatial-temporal scale and relations” (pp. 134-135). This possibility, which is fundamentally unacceptable in a legend or a parable, was first developed in the anekdot, which in turn paved the way for a biography growing from a cycle of anekdots about one character.

Biography is a genre of written, but also proto-fictional literature. According to Sergey Averintsev, “it completely owes its origin (as well as its plastic correlate—Greek sculptural portrait) to the crisis of the polis way of life (...), which freed the individualistic tendencies of spiritual life” (Averintsev 1973, 161). It is a genre that broke away from “the monumental historiography of Herodotean-Thucydidean type” (p. 188). That is why originally, biography was considered “a shallow and not very respectable genre” (p. 160), which to a large extent
can be explained by its origin from anecdote. Vilifying seems to be the oldest genre source of biography, which is very strongly perceived in an epigram. Thus, the denunciatory and grotesque biography of Pericles, composed by Stesimbrotos of Thasos, exposed the leader of the Athenian democracy as “a hero of provocative anecdotes and a secret villain,” confirming “the power of genre momentum of Classical biographism that developed, first and foremost, from gossips” (p. 170).

However, subsequently, especially in Plutarch’s works, biography became very culturally significant. Osip Mandelstam, the poet, had a valid reason to define writing novels as “an art to get the reader interested in the fate of individual people” (as individuals, and not as public figures or typical moral examples) and to claim that “the measure of a novel is human biography,” and that “a person without biography cannot be the thematic core of a novel” (Mandel’shtam, 1987, pp. 72-75).

The anekdot’s immediate successor is the very old literary genre of novelette, and through the agency of novelette and biography, the anekdot turns out to be the “grandfather” of a novel, as well as of a short story, which as a separate artistic genre is a literary phenomenon of relatively late formation. A story in the specialized meaning of this term (not in a broad meaning of “a narrative”) is the result of the drastic reorganization of the whole system of literary genres that was started by a novel. A short story differs from a novel, a phenomenon of purely written culture, not only in volume, but also in its original imitation of oral (direct) communication, which is what its genre signification was originally motivated by. Reprinting his “anekdot” of 1826, “Strange Duel” in 1830 as a “short story,” Orest Somov adds to the old text the figure of a narrator and the situation of telling a story.

The oral nature of such story—unlike that of the anekdot— is a literary convention of the genre, “a unique tonality of the narrative” (Loks), which makes it similar to the canonic genre of novella in its formation period. This convention subsequently presents itself not so much in the legendary manner of narration, but rather in a special communicative strategy, which, however, does not reduce itself to the anecdotal quality. The truly genre-generating feature of a short story, which was clearly discovered by Anton Chekhov (see Tiupa), is the complementarity of the diametrically opposite intentions of the genre thinking: the parabolic one and the anecdotal one. It is the complementarity of these heterogeneous communicative strategies that forms that “internal measure” of a noncanonic genre, which makes a short story similar to a novel and drastically dissociates it from the canonic novelette and novella (which genetically could be traced back to the anekdot and a parable, respectively).
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Evolution of a Speech Genre: The Case of Russian Canned Jokes (Anekdoty)

Elena Shmeleva and Alexei Shmelev

The article studies the Russian “anekdot” as a specific speech genre and its transformation in this century. It gives an account of the rules of telling jokes in Russian: formal means of introduction of a joke text into discourse, the setting of context, the “linguistic masks” of joke characters (linguistic clichés, accent, typical grammar mistakes, etc.), which correlate with their “behavior masks.” The article discusses the conceptualization of the world in Russian jokelore, what is taken for granted in Russian jokes, what one need to know to understand them, and the transformation of the “anekdot” in the last two decades. Canned jokes are very popular in Russia; joke-telling is practiced in everywhere among all ages. Several new characters of Russian jokelore have emerged since 1990. But reference to jokes has become more popular than joke-telling nowadays. The paper looks at ways of using jokes in the present-day discourse (in particular, indirect allusions to jokes). Finally, the paper discusses some issues in the translation of jokes from and into Russian. In order to achieve a desired effect in the target language, it is sometimes necessary to change the characters of the original joke or to add an introduction.

Keywords: speech genre, linguistic mask, conceptualization of the world, intertext, cross-cultural communication

The present paper discusses the evolution of Russian “anekdot” as a specific speech genre from its origin to its transformation in this century. As is known, Bakhtin (1986) wrote,

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“Like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain who, when speaking in prose, had no idea that was what
he was doing, we speak in diverse genres without suspecting that they exist” (pp. 10-11).
This is only partially true. Ordinary language speakers may not know the term “speech
genre”; however they can distinguish different speech genres from one another. When
referring to a speech activity, they use different expressions for different speech genres. In
particular, the speakers of Russian recognize anekdot as a specific orally circulated genre
with its own linguistic characteristics deserving a special “metalinguistic” label; it is clearly
distinguishable from adjacent speech genres (joking, telling a funny story, etc.). True
enough, before the 20th century, the word anekdot was used with reference to quite a
different speech genre (with different linguistic characteristics) that narrated factual events
in the life of a historical figure. However, the word acquired a new meaning in the beginning
of the 20th century to refer to a new popular speech genre. Rather than denoting accounts of
a real event, it now referred to invented jokes. Since 1920s, joke-telling had become an
important part of social interaction in Russian urban society. That is why proficient native
speakers of Russian know how to tell jokes and how to react to them.

**RULES OF TELLING JOKES IN RUSSIAN**

There are some formal means for introducing a canned joke into discourse: the speaker
may use such clichés as Znaesh’ anekdot? (‘Have you heard this one?’ [lit. ‘Do you know
this joke?’]). It may be observed that such cues never introduce spontaneous jokes: it would
be ridiculous to anticipate a spontaneous joke with something like Ja sejchas poshuchu
‘Now, I will joke’. However, if the speaker sees that the hearer takes a spontaneous joke at
face value, s/he often adds an overt statement such as Eto shutka (‘this is a joke’).

Contrary to spontaneous jokes, “anekdots” are not supposed to be invented by the
joke-teller. Quite the reverse, the teller always present a joke as heard from another teller
(Mne rasskazali takoi anekdot ‘They told me the following joke’). However, the “anekdot”
is supposed to be new for the audience; otherwise it may be contemptuously called anekdot
s borodoi ‘stale joke; so old it has whiskers on it’ (literally, ‘bearded joke’). In a regular
Russian joke (in contrast to “anekdots” of the 19th century), the setting of context is a
narrative sentence which starts with a verb in present tense (or a perfective verb in past
tense) followed by its subject:

(1)  **Sidit Shtrilts v restorane...**
    Is-sitting Stirlitz in restaurant
    ‘Stirlitz is sitting in a restaurant...’

(2)  **Edut v poezde russkii, ukrainets i evrei...**
    Are-traveling in train Russian, Ukrainian and Jew
‘A Russian, a Ukrainian, and a Jew are traveling on a train.’

That is why when Russians try to tell French or American jokes in Russian, they usually change the word order of the first sentence: *A man and his wife are talking...* would be rendered as

(3) *Beseduiut muzh s zhenoi...*

Are-talking husband with wife...

Along the same lines, the first sentence of a joke *A man met his friend he hadn’t seen for a long time...* would be rendered as

(4) *Vstrechajutsia dva druga posle dolgoi razluki...*

Are-meeting two friends after long separation...

To understand a joke, the audience often must be able to recognize the main characters that act in the fictitious world of the joke. Characters of Russian jokelore are recognizable by their appearance, way of behavior, clothes and other accessories. For example, the description *a short, bald man with beard wearing a kepka [leather cap with peak]* would be inevitably understood as referring to the Communist leader Lenin; if a male joke character wears a red jacket, gold chain and speaks on the cellular phone all the time, he is recognizable as a “new Russian.”

Even more important, the hearer often has to recognize the “linguistic masks” (linguistic clichés, accent, typical grammar mistakes, etc.) of joke characters, which correlate with their “behavior masks.” Thus, the Chukchi (a popular character of Russian ethnic jokes) is portrayed as a naïve outsider, who knows nothing about modern civilization and looks around in bewilderment. This attitude correlates well with the use of the particle *odnako,* which is a typical attribution to the Chukchi and is held to express bewilderment and perplexity. Georgians of Russian jokes aim at contact and mutual understanding with other people, which correlates with perceptions of their overuse of the “tag-particle” *da?* (for more details concerning “linguistic masks” of joke characters, see Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002, pp. 37-42, 52-62).

By way of example, let us consider the following Russian joke cited (in English translation) in (Draitser, 1998, p. 38) as an illustration of “the Georgian stereotype”:

(5) *With his very last ruble, a student buys a dozen walnuts. He cracks one of them. It’s empty. He cracks another one — again, it’s empty. When he comes to the last one, a worm wearing a cap crawls out and says: “It hurts, doesn’t it?”*
It is hardly plausible that one may conclude from the English version that the “voracious worm” represents a Georgian. Certain background knowledge is required here (e.g., that Georgians as fictional characters of Russian jokes usually sport oversized caps). What is more important, in the original version of the joke, the worm speaks with a Georgian accent (easily recognized by the Russian audience) and uses the “tag-particle” da attributed to Georgians of Russian jokes (It hurts, doesn’t it? stands for Obidno, da?).

“Linguistic masks” and their correlation with “behavior masks” are usually very much more pronounced with characters of ethnic jokes, that is, ethnic minorities such as Georgians, Chuckchis, Ukrainians, Jews (and Estonians in post-Soviet jokelore). Interestingly, jokes about “new Russians” share many characteristics of ethnic jokes; hence, it may be argued that the Russian joke tellers consider “new Russians” an ethnic minority of a sort (cf. Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002, pp. 68-73). In other words, jokes about “new Russians” express perceptions of “otherness” rather than “self.”

**SHORT HISTORY OF “ANEKDOTS” IN THE RUSSIAN SOCIETY**

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the word anekdot was used with reference to quite a different speech genre with different linguistic characteristics. Anekdot of 18th and 19th centuries had roughly the same meaning as its equivalent anecdote in English; it narrated factual events in the life of a historical figure. Linguistically, anekdots of those centuries were told in the narrative mode (in particular, they were told in past tense) while anekdot in the modern sense of the word is told in the depictive mode (rather performed than merely “told”).

“Anekdot” is a modern speech genre emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. At first, it was considered a “low” speech genre, and anekdot-tellers were not in high esteem; however, from 1920s it has become socially popular. Since then, joke-telling has been practiced in every part of society, at all ages.

Now joke-telling has remained popular; several new characters of Russian jokelore (such as new Russians, Estonians, computer programmers, drug addicts) have emerged since 1990. However, at the beginning of 21st century, reference to jokes has become even more popular than joke-telling. Russian jokes have become precedent texts; most often, they are not in the focus of attention, but are a source of winged words and proverbs. This gave rise to new speech genres: when the speaker cites a joke, explicitly reminds of a joke or makes an allusion to a joke, s/he presupposes that the joke is known to the audience, contrary to the traditional joke-telling where the joke should not be stale. Hidden allusions to jokes in main Russian newspapers make use of common stereotypes of Russian jokelore, “linguistic masks” of its characters, etc.

Reusing jokes in journalism and political discourse may fulfill illustrative or persuasive function. Consider, e.g., the argument used by Andrei Vulf, a State Duma deputy:
The presence of both an eagle and a star on a single banner is unnatural. Recall the joke about a Jew in a Russian bath: either take off your cross or put on your pants.

The famous aphorism by Viktor Chernomyrdin (the Chairman of the Government of Russia from 1992 to 1998) ‘Kakuiu by obshchestvennuiu organizaciiu my ni sozdavali — vse poluchaetsia KPSS’ ‘No matter what social organization we try to create, we always get the Soviet Communist Party’ (that is, ‘Every social organization that we try to create resembles the Soviet Communist Party’), which has become a popular proverb, also goes back to a joke:

Rabinovich works on an assembly line at a baby carriage plant. His wife asks him to steal one part a week in order to make a baby carriage for their future child. Nine months later, Rabinovich begins to assemble the parts. He tells his wife, “You know, no matter how I put it together, I always get a machine gun.”

However, some of the winged words going back to canned jokes are used so widely that they do not require any knowledge of the source joke from the audience. Consider a couple of examples. The idiom (ves’) belyi i pushistyi ‘(all so) goody-goody’ (literally ‘white and fluffy’) goes back to the following joke:

An ant is running in a forest and sees a frog sitting on the bank of a stream. “Why are you so green and slimy?” he asks. “I am sick,” answers the frog. “Usually I am white and fluffy.”

The following joke is the origin of the popular saying Dokazyvai, chto ty ne verbliud ‘when they have punished you, it is no use to prove post factum that you did not do anything wrong’ (literally ‘try to prove you are not a camel’):

Prisutstvie na odnom znameni orla i zvezdy neestestvenno. Kak v tom anekdote pro evreia v bane: vy libo krest snimite, libo shtany naden’te.
Both idioms may be used addressing the audience that has no idea about the source jokes. The more so, the speaker may use them without such knowledge.

In addition, another new genre has been brought into existence: posting jokes on the numerous web-sites. “Anekdots” posted on the Internet lose their essential characteristics of an oral speech genre, and this affects their linguistic features: word-order, verbal tense, “linguistic masks” of the characters, etc. Thus, almost half of the Russian jokes posted on the Internet may have the first sentence that starts with the subject followed by the verb.

People generally understand that jokes belong to oral speech, and, when they place jokes in the Internet, they try to show the expressive intonation of the speaker with the help of graphic means or use special comments to describe the gestures that he uses when telling the joke. Nevertheless, even such an Internet text fails to bring across all the content of the oral joke. Moreover, Internet sites often have long jokes that are impossible to remember and retell: one can only print them out and read them (10 prichin, po kotorym pivo luchshe zhenshchiny ‘10 reasons why beer is better than a woman’, Vy rodils’ v SSSR, esli... ‘You were born in the USSR, if...’, etc.).

**BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AS A PREREQUISITE FOR UNDERSTANDING “ANEKDOTS”**

Joke-telling is a cooperative enterprise; so, if the hearer fails to get the joke or gets it too late, mutual frustration is a result. The understanding of jokes requires not only high linguistic competence and “humor competence” (Raskin, 1985) but also background knowledge of social and cultural life, ethnic and gender stereotypes. Consider the following joke of Soviet times:

(10) *Na Olimpiiskikh igrakh sovetskii metatel’ molota postavil novyi rekord. Korrespondentny sprashivaiut ego: ‘Kak vam udalos’ metnut’ molot na takoe bol’she rasstoianie?’ — ‘Eto chto, esli by on byl v mestve s serpom, ia by ego shvyrnl vdvoe dal’she.’*
In the Olympics, a Soviet hammer thrower set a new record. Correspondents interviewed him, “How did you manage to hurl that hammer so far?” “If it were together with a sickle, I would send it twice as far.”

This joke will fall flat if the audience does not possess the necessary knowledge that Soviet State Emblem was a hammer and a sickle.

Comprehension of jokes needs also the inner knowledge of the conceptualization of the world in Russian joke lore, that is, what is taken for granted in Russian jokes and what one needs to know to understand them. In order to understand the following Russian jokes, the hearer must know not only that (1) in Russian clinics, they normally announce the newborn baby’s weight in grams (because of the metric system), and 3500 is considered to be normal weight for a newborn, and (2) Volga is a name of great Russian river and it was also an expensive Russian car brand, but also that (3) in the world of Russian joke lore, New Russians are rich and ignorant while their behavior expresses aplomb and self-assurance:

(11) *Sidit novyi russkii v roddome, zhdet, poka zhena rodit. Siaiushchaia medsestra vykhodit iz rodil'nogo otdelenia i govorit: “Pozdravliaiu, u vas syn, 3500!” — “Bez bazara!” [the joke teller pronounces this in a self-assured way and imitates producing cash.]*

‘A New Russian is waiting in a maternity ward waiting room to hear news about his wife, who’s presently at labor. A radiant nurse exits the maternity ward and says, “Congratulations, sir! You have a boy, and it is 3500!” “3500 is no problem for a man like me.”

(12) *Novogo russkogo sprashivaiut: “Ty mozhesh’ kupit’ Volgu?” — “Konechno, no chto ia budu de lat’ so vsei etoi vo doi i korablami?!”*

‘“Can you afford to buy the Volga?” a New Russian is asked. “Of course I can,” he replies, “but what shall I do with all those boats and water?!”’

If the audience does not possess the required background knowledge, the jokes would most likely fail to have their intended effect on the listener.

**RUSSIAN MARITAL JOKES IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

When different “jocular views of the world” are compared to each other, one can discover substantial differences between them. For example, American and Russian marital jokes are very similar. They have same characters (*husband, wife, lover*, etc.) and same plots — sexual life, family budget, housekeeping, shopping, children, in-laws, etc. But stereotypes of family life in Russian and American jokes are different. E. g., in American jokes husband
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ears money, he has a bank account and credit card, and wife spends family money for
buying diamonds or fur-coats while in Russian jokes, wife is responsible for family budget,
husband should give all money to her and he does his best to hide some money from his
wife. The “standard” husband as presented in Russian jokes usually tries to get out of making
love with his wife; he prefers to drink vodka with his friends while in American jokes it is
the wife who always tries to avoid making love with her husband. Consider:

(13) “Doktor, pomogite moei zhene! Za den’gami ia ne postoiu, pust’ eto budet luchshaia
bol’nica, luchshie vrachi, samye dorogie lekarstva.” “Eto ne pomozhet,” — otvechaet
doktor, — esli vy khotti, chtoby ona ostalas’ zhiva, vy dolzhny zanimat’sia s nei
liubov’yu tri raza v den’.” “Tri raza?” — “Da, tri raza.” Vozvrashchetsia chelovek k
zhene, ona ego sprashивает: “Nu, chto skazal doktor?” — “Chto-chto, umresh’ ty, vot
chtu.” (Russian joke)

‘A man asks, “Doctor, tell me, what can I do for to help my wife. The best hospital in
the world, best doctors, the most expensive drugs, I can afford it.” Doctor answers,
“Nothing helps. If you want her to live, you will have to make love to her three times
a day.” “Three times a day?” “Yes, three times a day.” The man comes back to his wife.
She asks him, “So what did the doctor say?” The husband answers, “What did he say?
He said you were going to die.”’

(14) Woman: So give it to me straight, Doctor.
Doctor: Very well. Your husband is in terrible shape, and if you want him to live, you’re
going to have to make sure he’s well fed and comfortable and happy at all times,
and you’re going to have to make love to him three times a day.
Woman: Three times a day?
Doctor: Three times a day.
Husband: So what’d the doctor say?
Woman: He says you’re going to die.

(American joke from Danforth and Voeltz, 2001, p. 147)

Russian and American jokes also have different stereotypes of wife’s and husband’s
duties to keep the house clean, to wash dishes, etc. Consider the following two jokes:

(15) Razgovarivaiut amerikanka, frantsuzhenka i russkai a o svoikh muzh’iakh. Amerikanka
govorit: “Srazu posle svad’by ia svoemu skazala, chto, mol, ni ubirat’sia, ni myt’
posudu, ni gotovit’ — nichego ne budu. Den’ ego ne videla, dva ne videla, na tretii den’
on prikhodit domoi s kuchei bytovoi tekhniki: avtomitcheskim pylesosom,
posudomoechnoi mashinoi, stiral’noi mashinoi, sushilkoi... I teper’ vsiu rabotu delaiut
mashiny.” Frantsuzhenka govorit: “Ia tozhe svoemu skazala: ni ubirat’sia, ni myt’
posudu, ni gotovit’ ne budu. Den’ ego ne videla, dva ne videla, na tretii den’ on privodit
domoi domrabotnitsu. Teper’ v dome vsegda ubrano, posuda pomыта, bel’e postirano
i goryachii obed na stole.” Russkaia govorit: “Ia svoemu posle svad’by to zhe samoe skazala. Den’ ego ne videla, dva ne videla, na tretii den’ ele-ele odnim glazom stala vider’.” (Russian joke)

‘An American woman, a French woman, and a Russian woman are discussing their new husbands. The American woman said, “Just after wedding, I told my husband that I would not do all the cleaning, the dishes and the cooking. The first day I did not see him, the second day I did not see him, but on the third day he came home with a vacuum cleaner, a dishwasher, a washing machine, a dryer, etc. Now, the machines do everything.” The French woman said, “Just after wedding, I also told my husband that I would not do all the cleaning, the dishes and the cooking. The first day I did not see him, the second day I did not see him, but on the third day he came home with a housemaid and the house was clean, dishes washed, laundry done and hot meals were on the table.” The Russian woman said, “Just after wedding, I told my husband the same thing. The first day I did not see him, the second day I did not see him, but by the third day I could see a little out of one eye.”

(16) Three men were sitting around bragging about how they had given their new wives duties. The first man had married a Catholic woman and bragged that he had told his wife she was to do all the dishes and house cleaning that needed doing at their house. He said it took a couple days, but on the third day he came home to a clean house and the dishes were all washed and put away. The second man had married a Mormon woman. He bragged that he had given his wife orders that she was to do all the cleaning, the dishes and the cooking. He told them the first day he didn’t see any results, but the next day it was better. By the third day, the house was clean, the dishes were done, and he had a huge dinner on the table. The third man had married a Jewish girl. He boasted that he told her that her duties were to keep the house clean, dishes washed, lawn mowed, laundry done and hot meals on the table, every day. He said the first day he didn’t see anything, the second day he didn’t see anything, but by the third day most of the swelling had gone down and he could see a little out of his left eye. (From http://www.azarajokes.com/forum/default.asp)

It might be noted that the Russian joke also reflects stereotypes of American and French people (as well as “auto-stereotypes” of Russians) while the American joke reflects stereotypes of different religions.

**INTERTEXTUAL RELATIONS IN JOKES: ALLUSIONS**

There are a lot of jokes based on allusion to a popular movie, a popular advertising or TV show. Allusive jokes fall flat when the audience does not possess the necessary knowledge to which the jokes allude. For example:
Pilots try to land a plane at Sheremetyevo airport near Moscow but because of engine trouble cannot do it. They repeat their attempts twice with no result. The second pilot asks the first one, “do you have an idea as to what we shall do?’ — “No idea” — “So, no idea, no IKEA.”

To understand this joke, the hearer must know that (1) IKEA is a big store chain; (2) the biggest of IKEA stores near Moscow is situated close to airport Sheremetyevo; (3) its advertising slogan is “New Idea from IKEA.”

In many jokes the allusion is further complicated by the presence of another phenomenon:

(18) Armianskoe radio sprashivait: “Chto skazala Tat’ana Oneginu posle togo, kak emu otdalas’?”

Armianskoe radio otvechaet: “Onegin, ia s krovat’ — ne vstanu.”

The Armenian Radio was asked, “What did Tatiana tell Onegin after their first intercourse?”

The Armenian Radio answers, “Onegin! I’m not getting out of bed.”

The answer of the Armenian Radio is a take-off of a well known line from the libretto of Tchaikovsky’s opera “Eugene Onegin” Onegin, ia skryvat’ ne stanu ‘I won’t hide (my love)’ rendered with an “Armenian” accent. It is worth noting that Emil Draitser (1999) cites a version of this joke but fails to recognize the object of parody. He is under the impression that Onegin, ia skryvat’ ne stanu is a line from Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin” (Draitser, 1999, p. 123) while the line only appears in the libretto by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Konstantin Shilovsky. The more so, he writes that the sentence ia s krovat’ — ne vstanu is used “instead of the grammatically correct ia s krovati ne vstanu” because “in order to make the parody fit the rhythm of the original, the lines of Tatiana’s letter to Onegin are rendered with a stereotypical Jewish distortion of the Russian grammatical norm” (Draitser, 1999, p. 277). First, the cue should be pronounced with an Armenian rather than Jewish accent (since it pretends to be an answer of the “Armenian Radio”) while such a “distortion of the Russian grammatical norm” is typical both of Armenians and Jews (as characters of Russian jokes); even more important, Onegin, ia skryvat’ ne stanu is a line not of Tatiana’s letter to Onegin, but of her husband’s aria.
We might observe in passing that jokes are much more commonly based on an allusion to movies, a popular advertising or TV shows than to a piece of literature. The exceptions are quite numerous jokes with allusion to fictional stories about animals, e.g. Mumu (one of Turgenev’s earlier works written in 1854, the tale of the deaf mute, Gerasim, and his dog, the eponymous Mumu). Consider:


Gerasim threw Mumu into the river. She was drowning for a long time, but a peasant saved her. Mumu: “Shit, I almost drowned.” The peasant: “Oh! This is the first time I ever met a dog who speaks.” Mumu: “Oh! This is the first time I ever met a peasant who speaks.”

**INTERTEXTUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN JOKES**

It is not unusual to find Russian canned jokes with an allusion to other canned jokes. Consider:


Yeltsin, Chernomyrdin and Chubais are playing cards. Yeltsin warns, shuffling: “No cheating! If I catch anyone cheating, I’ll punch him in the face... that’s right, his smug red-haired face!”

To understand this joke, one must know the reputation of Anatoly Chubais, the red-haired privatization chief in Russia of 1990s; however, in addition, one must know the following original joke:


The bear, the wolf, the hare and the fox are playing cards. The bear warns, shuffling: “No cheating! If I catch anyone cheating, I’ll punch her in the face... that’s right, her smug red-furred face!”
This phenomenon is akin to continuation of the original joke. There are two types of
continuation: adding new characters and adding a new point. Thus, with every new leader
of Soviet Union political jokes that compared unique characteristics of leaders got
continuation: a new character was added. Consider the following original joke:

(22) _Edet poezd v kommunizm. Vdrug poezd ostanaivvaetsia: vperedi net rel’sov. Chto
sdelali raznye vozhdii v takoi situacii? Lenin [imitating his speech, the teller
mispronounces r]: “Nado sobrat’ vsekh na subbotnik, rabochie i krest’iane vse
naladiat.” Stalin zakrichal [the teller pronounces what follows with a heavy Georgian
accent]: “Rasstreliat’ mashinista i polovinu passazhirov!” Khrushchev predlozhil: “…
Davайте snimem rel’ sy pozadi poezda i polozhim ikh vperedi.”

A railway carriage is going to communism. Unexpectedly the train stops because there
are no rails ahead. What did different Soviet leaders do in such a situation? Lenin
suggested, “Perhaps, we should call a subbotnik, so that workers and peasants fix the
problem.” Stalin shouted, “The driver and half of the passengers will be executed!”
Khrushchev suggested, “Let’s take the rails behind the train and use them to construct
the tracks in the front.”

Now, here is the continuation of the joke:

(23) _Brezhnev skazal: “Tovarishchi, davайте задвинем занавески, включим граммофон и
будем делать вид, что едем.” Andropov vyglial v okno i umer. Chernenko umer,
dazhe ne popyatavshis’ vyglialut’ v okno. Gorbachev prikazal vsem passzhiram vyiti iz
poezda i krichat’: “Vperedi net rel’sov!”

Brezhnev said, “Comrades, let’s draw the curtains, turn on the gramophone and pretend
we’re moving!” Andropov put his head out of the window and died. Chernenko died
without even making an attempt to put his head out of the window. Gorbachev ordered
the passengers to get out of the train and to shout, “There are no rails ahead!”

Another type of continuation may be illustrated with the following joke about merging
the Karelo-Finnish SSR into the Russian SFSR as the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist
Republic in 1956. To understand the joke one must know that the Karelo-Finnish SSR was
formed in 1940 after the Winter War by merging the territory ceded by Finland after the
Winter War and the former Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (within the
Russian SFSR), but the Finnish population of the ceded area had been evacuated to Finland.

(24) _Pochemu Karelo-Finskiu SSR vkluchili v sostav RSFSR i ubrali slovo “finskaia”? —
Potomu chto v nei nashlos’ tol’ko tri finna: findirektor, finispektr i Finkelshtein.
Why, when the Karelo-Finnish SSR was incorporated into the Russian SFSR, was the word Finnish was eliminated? — Because only three Finns were found there: fin-director (financial director), fin-inspector (financial inspector) and Finkelstein [a typical Jewish last name].

Later, the joke was continued as follows (making use of common stereotypes of Jews) and the point slightly shifted:

_Zatem vyiasnilos’, chto eto odin i tot zhe chelovek._

It turned out later that it was the same man.

**TELLING JOKES IN OTHER LANGUAGES**

People often have to try to tell a joke in another language in the process of cross-cultural communication. Hence, the problem of translating jokes arises. The following considerations lean upon the distinction between verbal and referential jokes (Attardo, 1994, p. 95). The translation of the former is impossible; sophisticated techniques aiming at recreations of a similar kind of meaning/sound correlation (Laurian, 1992) would lead to telling a similar joke in another language rather that the translational equivalent of the original joke. Thus, many of the Stirlitz jokes are based on a straight pun and hence are untranslatable. (Addressing the audience that possesses some knowledge of Russian, the joke-teller may keep the original version of the pun.)

On the contrary, referential jokes may be told in a different language. However some comments may be necessary. If understanding a joke requires background knowledge and the joke-teller is not sure that the audience possesses this knowledge, s/he may add an introduction (a brief comment before telling the joke). Thus, most of the Vovochka jokes could be easily understood by a foreigner who is told that Vovochka is the Russian equivalent of Dirty Johnny. Sometimes the necessary comment may be inserted into the text of the joke. Thus, to obtain a better understanding of the above hare and camels joke, the joke-teller might add some phrase like during the Stalinist terror to the very first sentence (cf. Laurian, 1992, p. 120).

However, if a more detailed explanation is required, an introductory comment may not help: with a lengthy explanation the joke would completely lose its strong comic effect. Thus, some of the Vovochka jokes play on Vovochka being a diminutive for Vladimir, the first name of the Bolshevik leader Lenin, as well as the former president Putin. In addition, in the Soviet Union, it was a common knowledge that Lenin’s oldest brother Alexander (Sasha) was arrested and hanged for participating in a terrorist bomb plot threatening the life
of Tsar Alexander III. If the audience is not aware of these facts, the following jokes will be difficult to understand:

(26)  

_Sidit Vovochka na uroke grustnyi, k devochkam ne pristaet, dazhe matom ne rugaetsia._

_Maria Ivanovna v uzhase sprashivae t: “Vovochka, chto sluchilos’?” — “Brata Sashu povesili.”_

Vovochka is sad in class, he does not tease the girls, he does not beat the boys, and he does not even use dirty language. Distressed, Maria Ivanovna asks, “Vovochka, what happened?” “They hung my brother Sasha.”

Thus, many jokes defy telling in other languages with an immediate humorous effect. However, even though a joke may lose its comic effect, telling jokes to people of other cultures with all the necessary explanations may have sense of its own. It may be regarded as “a path to a greater understanding among people and a sounder communication in the world” (Laurian, 1992, p. 126).

**REFERENCES**


VADIM V. DEMENTYEV

This paper discusses anekdots published in the “Smiles from Different Latitudes” column published in the 1970s in the Soviet humorous journal “Krokodil.” Belonging to the spheres of official and non-official culture, anekdots published in the “Smiles from Different Latitudes” column represents an interesting, although thoroughly artificial phenomenon: a creative combination of a folk, “soviet anekd ot culture” and an official political satire. This paper provides an overview of the structure, themes and characters of these constructed anekdots, as well as the authors and intended addressees.

Keywords: oral vs. written anekdots, official political satire, Soviet anekdot folk culture

The texts of anekdots published in the Soviet humorous magazine “Krokodil” (Crocodile) may be divided into two groups: those published in the 1960s, and the anekdots of the 1970s. As we see our task here, it is more important to examine the Russian anekdots of the 1970s as a special speech genre, an expression of a unique and important non-official, folk “Soviet anekdot culture” during the late-Soviet period.

As Elena and Alexey Shmelev note, since the 1920s when free mass-media disappeared in Russia, anekdots, primarily political anekdots, emerged as a widespread speech genre. Anti-Soviet anekdots circulated within many different social groups, including the intelligentsia and intellectual elite. In the 1960s and 1970s, when telling anekdots became less dangerous, anekdots became so widespread and so common that in many respects they came to overshadow the official broadcast political news. All types of anekdots — general,

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ethnic, anekdots about specific social groups — were in fact “anti-Soviet,” which was the very purpose for circulating them (Shmeleva, Shmelev 2005: 294).

Unfortunately, now we have very few recordings or transcriptions of authentic, oral Russian anekdots from the 1970s. Some researchers even have concluded that during that period anekdots were never written down (Norman 2007: 436). Nevertheless, there is an important and, in some ways, fairly reliable source of quite authentic materials for research — the Soviet humorous magazine “Krokodil.”

To study anekdots diachronically we need elaborate methods, including precise principles of selection and analysis of the material. Unfortunately, this is a major problem for the diachronic study of oral genres in general. It is known that before the first sound-recording devices appeared in the 19th century, the authentic characteristics of oral speech had been described and discussed by writers in discussions of stylization, rather than categorization or typification (Kozhevnikova 1970). When analyzing anekdots, this problem becomes even more evident because numerous published collections of recordings and descriptions of Russian oral speech from the 1970s by scholars studying colloquial speech (RRR 1973; 1978) provide no examples of authentic performances of anekdots.

Officially, anekdots in USSR were never published. Nevertheless, it is well known that at that time some were published unofficially and beyond the reach of censors (these were the editions published abroad, as well as some Samizdat publications). In some of those unofficial publications the anekdot was analyzed as a genre, but in our opinion their material was very poor and did not do justice to authentic performances of anekdots.

THE “SMILES OF DIFFERENT LATITUDES” COLUMN: GENERAL FEATURES AND TYPES OF ANEKDOTS

The magazine “Krokodil” had been published in the Soviet Union since 1922. In the 1960s and 1970s three numbers were published each month or 36 total issues each year. “Krokodil” started to publish anekdots for the first time in 1966. A regular column titled “Just an Anekdoot” featured five to ten anekdots each issue. It is interesting to note that some of the anekdots were about foreign realities and conveyed a specific foreign flavor. Some of the anekdots were about native realities with explicit markers of Russian or Soviet reality.

In 1971 the “Just an anekdot” column was replaced by the “Smiles of different latitudes.” In each issue of the magazine, this column contained two to eighteen jokes exclusively dealing with foreign realities. This characterized the nature of censorship laws at that time, especially for any official publication of the central “Pravda” publishing like “Krokodil.”

The effect of the “foreign” reality was created by the use of “foreign” names (John, Jimmy, Pierre, Bill, Peter, Willy, Jack, Sven, Mary, Elsa, Monique); “foreign” forms of
address (sir, Herr, signor / signora, monsieur, madam, freken, freulein, fru, and often old, pre-revolutionary Russian ‘soudarynya’ — madam); more general markers of “foreign” realities (names of currencies: dollars and cents, francs, pounds; names of cities: New York, Paris; toponyms: the Notre Dame de Paris, the Luxembourg garden, Cote de l’Azur; types of cars: Lincoln, Fiat; political parties: conservatives and liberals); and various perceived representatives of Capitalist society (presidents, dictators, bankers, millionaires, gangsters, Mafioso, the unemployed, artistic celebrities, professional sportsmen, clergymen, missionaries, war criminals and soldiers of fortune).

Among all of the diverse markers of “foreign” realities, were often included explicit references to socialist countries (the names: Janosz, Iřiček, Pepiček, Józef, Ferko, Petko; forms of address: pan, pani; names of currencies, forint, lev, złoty; names of cities: Kraków, Sopot, Zakopane) and, in general, all well-known markers of all of the “Socialist camp” nations. In the “Smiles of different latitudes” column there were also various national/ethnic anekdotes about Scots, Americans (especially about American tourists and the nouveau riche), British, Italians, Bulgarians from Gabrovo, and so on. Actually many nations or ethnic groups from around the globe were broadly represented, with one significant exception: there were no anekdotes about those living in the U.S.S.R, e.g. Georgians, Chukchi, Ukrainians, or Jews. Nevertheless, there were also many anekdotes which were not exclusively foreign but “native” in large part. Occasionally, even when individual anekdotes displayed specific perceived markers of “foreign cultures,” the attention of readers was drawn more to “native reality” than to any “foreign culture.” From this perspective, the magazine “Krokodil” generally reflected many characteristics of unofficial, folk “anekdot culture” of the USSR of the 1970s.

In this paper we will choose to follow the most widespread and known models of classification and analysis of anekdotes (Attardo 1994; Bergson 1992; Raskin 1985), and we will single out their most known types (Karasik 1997; Sannikov 1999; Sedov 2005), primarily from the point of view of their thematic characteristics, and secondarily from the point of view of more abstract features such as pragmatic and linguistic mechanisms of humour. In the “Smiles of different latitudes” column we find such following text types as texts structurally corresponding to the text structure of oral anekdotes; “anekdot-narratives” maximally close to written genres (e.g., humorous tales); “anekdotes” in the older, classical sense of a humorous historical tale based on a historical event or person; some role-playing scenes; quibbles, language play and aphorisms; parodies of announcement, advertising, diaries, encyclopaedia, or private correspondence.

When considering types of anekdot appearing in this column, it is particularly interesting to note that there were many abstract anekdotes. This is notable, given that official censure of “formalism” was still a danger in the 1970s:
Who is that coming our way, Karl?'
‘If I am not mistaken, it is freken Jansson, and if I am, it is freken Lundgren!’ (1975, Nr 31)

Similarly, “absurd” anecdotes requiring some interpretative effort on the part of the reader were quite common in this column:

‘Do you really believe that your husband goes fishing every Sunday, as he claims?’
‘Yes, I do’.
‘Why don’t you think he lies?’
‘Because he always comes back without fish’. (1976, Nr 1)

On the other hand, in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column there were rather few anecdotes based on language games. In addition to the problematic status of “formalism,” this may have been because playing with the Russian language would have weakened the overall “foreign aroma” of the column. Here is an example of playing with Russian category of grammatical gender:

Сын спрашивает отца:
— Как можно отличить зайца от зайчики?
— Берешь зайца или зайчику за уши и опускаешь на землю. Если побежал, — значит, заяц, а если побежала, — значит, зайчиха. (1972, Nr 35)

A son asks his Father:
— How can you tell a male hare from a female hare?
— You take a hare by its ears and let it go free. If it ran (Russian ‘pobezhal’ masculine verb) it’s a male hare, and if it ran (Russian ‘pobezhala’ feminine verb), then it’s a female hare.

It is obvious that the types of anecdotes discussed in this article cannot be considered an adequate classification. However, by pointing out the diversity of types of anecdote found in this magazine, we conclude that comprehensively classifying anecdotes under tough censorship and subject to many ideological restrictions is just as difficult a task as providing a comprehensive classification of anecdote types, either oral or written, official or unofficial. In other words, the “Smiles of different latitudes” column presents practically the full range of types of anecdotes found in all spheres and walks of life, excluding, of course, the most explicit anti-Soviet anecdotes.

**TEXT STRUCTURE: THE MANNER OF RECORDING**

Some linguists postulate the anecdote is an exclusively oral speech genre. Elena and Alexey Smelev even argue that the proper focus of analysis and classification is the actual
performance or the “telling of the anekdot” (rasskazyvanie anekdota). The analyst must focus on the processes of the “telling” rather than the structure of the text. In the opinion of these linguists, one key characteristic of the anekdot as an exclusively oral speech genre is the formal opening of the anekdot with a metatextual “introduction” like “Listen to an anekdot” (Слушайте анекдот…) (Shmeleva, Shmelev 2002). These researchers (Shmeleva & Shmelev 1999: 133; Sedov 2005: 4-5) also claim that the very purpose of the anekdot genre is to create a marked, humorous reality, rather than a narrating, depicting or role-playing a scene or script. This goal is fulfilled by specific, marked language forms. One of the most important, according to Shmeleva and Shmelev (1999), is use of the present tense, imperfect aspect verb as a marker of the performative, creative process. Thus, Shmeleva and Shmelev argue that since the real anekdot genre is oral, any attempt to transcribe it automatically changes the genre. As such, a new genre emerges — the recording of an anekdot.

Nevertheless, we must notice that even though most contemporary oral anekdots as researched by Shmeleva and Shmelev do contain these structure characteristics, so do many of the written version of anekdots found in magazines, special edited collections and newspapers. Contrary to Shmeleva and Shmelev’s arguments about the transformation of oral anekdots when transcribed, we can find specific features of the proposed oral genre of anekdots presented in written form. Although in-depth comparative research is beyond the scope of this article, we provide simple but telling illustrations here:

A guy is coming to a bar which sits at the top of a tower. So, he enters it and sees that no one is there but a boy, such a one all in black sitting at a table and drinking glass after glass of vodka without any snack. Well, the guy got interested, comes up to him and asks: ‘Boy, why is it that you drink glass after glass of vodka without any snack?’ That one answers: ‘Well, I want to end my life by suicide, I jump from the tower and don’t do myself in. The guy didn’t believe it, so that one grabbed a glass and drank it down and jumped, and in a few minutes returned, and says: ‘You try, you will manage to do so, too’. The guy drank a glass, jumped, and was destroyed. After this a waiter comes up to the boy in black and says: ‘What a bitch you are, BATMAN, when you get drunk’. (anekdot retrieved from http://anekdot.ru)
The style of writing here reproduces the characteristics of speech of a narrator who is not describing an event but depicting vividly an unusual situation. This text contains many markers of oral speech: marked word order, numerous colloquialisms and slang. There is no redundancy to distract attention from the action or the point of the story, for here simplicity, even monotony, is preferable to lexical richness in such a performance. At the same time, this is a written text; it is not an attempt to mirror speech. Note that there are clear elements of narrative description, like the pleonasm *takoj ves’ v chernom* (all in black) as well as the graphemic representation of stress in the capitalized word “BATMAN.”

Many Russian linguists note that in mass media, in literature and probably in all written texts and genres during the Soviet period, there were strong prohibitions against the use of any markers of oral speech (cf. Sirotinina 1995). Of course, this seems to be even more remarkable in comparison to the almost boundless permisiveness in mass media today. Nevertheless, this characteristic absence of obvious markers of oral speech is the primary difference between the texts in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column from 1971 to 1979 and contemporary recordings and transcriptions of anekdots, but we think there is yet another, more remarkable and maybe more important difference.

In the U.S.S.R in the 1970s the anekdot was perceived as an exquisite example of an oral genre. At the same time, in Soviet official culture the anekdot genre was not supported or approved in any way. To the contrary, the official ideology actively opposed unofficial “anekdot culture.” It was forced to pretend — as it might be expected, given the widespread popularity of this oral genre — that this anekdot genre had never really existed. So, the “Krokodil” editors tried to claim that the texts they published on the pages of this legal, official Soviet magazine were typical examples of traditional written humorous literature and that they bore no resemblance whatsoever to those “indecent,” oral anekdots told by the people and rejected by the State. Here it must be noted that even the word “anekdot” was almost never used, even though this fact obviously contradicted the very name of the 1960s column “Just an Anekdot.”

Given this situation, the publishing of anekdots that compared the anekdot to a satirical novel is well worth noting:

Two friends speak to each other.
‘What’s the news about the new satirical novel you sent to the magazine?’
‘Just imagine it! The editors have cruelly abridged it and included it in the “Just an anekdot” column!’ (1969, Nr 3)

Naturally, the mixing of two genres is funny in itself, but a more important fact here seems to be the explicit comparison to a satirical novel — another written genre. In fact, the researcher may easily conclude that this was a conscious strategy to make the texts themselves difficult or impossible to reproduce orally. To accomplish this many structural lexical, syntactic and stylistic characteristics of written texts were used, e.g. complex and
hypercomplex sentences with many subordinate clauses; complex sentences with different types of subordinate clauses; or complex morpho-syntactic structures with participles, markers of indirect speech, and obsolete, bookish and archaic devices.

It is crucial to underscore the fact that complex sentences with mixed types of subordinate clauses and participial modifiers contrast absolutely with the morpho-syntactic structures of typical Russian speech. Yet such complex structures characteristic of written texts were used not only in the speech of the narrators of anekdots but also in the speech of the characters in the anekdots. The following provides instructive examples of written anekdots that are practically impossible to imagine as oral narratives:

On the road back home, a drunk notices an amateur-astronomer surveying the sky with a telescope mounted on a tripod. The drunk decided to have a glimpse of the sky, too, and immediately spotted a falling star.

'It's fantastic, he exclaimed in delight, addressing the astronomer — You are probably the best sniper in the city!' (1977, Nr 3).

From the point of view of form, many anekdots in the "Smiles of different latitudes" column resembled essays, parables, novellas and other literary genres. Their texts were obviously narrative and non-depictive. Many of these texts were marked by lexical and syntax redundancy reflected in rich vocabulary and excessive use of synonyms. It is interesting that such forms were pleonastic not only from the point of view of norms of oral speech but from the point of view of most types of written speech.

Let us have a look at the text structure of one of those anekdots. Specifically, the clearly marked narrator's lines, as well as the verb of speaking, selected by the narrator with a special and rather unnatural variability. In a way, lexical richness as a means of description, but not depiction, also serves the goal of denying any comparison between the anekdots in the "Smiles of different latitudes" column and the anekdots in oral communication:

A sailor cast off on an uninhabited island caught a parrot and taught it to speak. One evening the parrot flew back to its master extremely excited.

'A woman is over there, it hawled, and she is so beautiful!' Agitated, the sailor ran after the parrot
who was flying and shouting:

‘What eyes, boss! And what a figure!’

At last, the parrot lighted on a branch, and

pointed with its beak:

‘That’s her, boss.’

‘You damned cheat, swore the sailor in a fury, this is only a female parrot!’

Of course, all of this was related to the general state of Russian culture and norms of speech, especially given the fact that in the late-Soviet period official and non-official cultures were strictly opposed. As some researchers have demonstrated (Horoshaja rech’ 2001; Kon’kov 2002), the ultimate consequence of this strict opposition was a general, mass perception that written speech in all Soviet mass-media was false. That opposition and the resulting perceptions might have been useful to the Soviet publishers in one more respect. The readers might consider humorous texts *foreign* not only in relation to perceptions of foreign reality but also because of the perceived *unnaturalness of text structure which could remind the readers of awkward, translated texts*. At the same time, there were still individual examples of anekdotes similar in structure to the *telling anekdotes genre*. Thus, the following text may be successfully reproduced orally without great difficulty:

Two policemen get into the patrol car.

‘Hey, Joe, the sergeant says, I’ll switch on the flasher. Go out and see if it is working.’

‘It works, Joe cries out, Oh, it doesn’t work! Works again! Oh, doesn’t work again…’

But on the whole such clear markers of oral speech were very seldom found in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column.

In the final analysis, when we compare two types of recorded anekdotes — the contemporary ones and those featured in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column in the 1970s — we may conclude that the relation between telling the anekdote and recording it *has changed*. In the earlier Soviet period, writing an anekdote employed forms characteristic of all “traditional” written genres, differing greatly from the form of oral anekdotes. At present,
however, the written anekdot is significantly closer in form to the oral genre, as we saw very clearly, for example, in the anekdot about Batman above.

We can hardly imagine those older oral anekdot forms published in the new collections today. We suppose that the reader would immediately notice the difference, and not only because many of the earlier written anekdots were clear expressions of Communist ideology published in Soviet official magazines.

Today anekdots appear to be clearly associated with things people write down and read. Today the very image of a “new consumer” of anekdots has been formed: a contemporary Russian who, if he wants to laugh, goes not to the Soviet communal kitchen but to the kiosk where special entertainment books are sold, including newly published collections of anekdots. This suggests rather clearly that the norms for writing anekdots have already been formed. We suppose that the “Smiles of different latitudes” column, in a way, paved the way for this and contributed to the formation of the new anekdot.

**Thematic Structure: Characters of Anekdots**

As we have already said, the most obvious characteristic of the “Smiles of different latitudes” column was the extremely negative portrayal of political enemies of the Soviet regime, e.g. imperialists, businessmen, *nouveau riche*, racists, killers, or war criminals:

American soldiers in Vietnam.

‘Hi, Michael, don’t you envy Jim? You are of the same age, but he is already a sergeant.’

‘Yes, but he was released from prison a year earlier than me.’ (1971, Nr 15)

On the other hand, representatives of the lower classes are portrayed quite positively. The best of them are intelligent, witty, possess a strong sense of self-respect, and deliver their enemies and oppressors intellectual challenges they cannot handle:

The boss loaded the new worker’s wheelbarrow with heavy lead pipes. The worker rubbed the back of his head:

‘Probably, sir, he said, you should also tie a pair of concrete blocks to my arms.’

‘Why?’

‘To prevent me from running away.’ (1978, Nr 33)

This is a type reminiscent of Švejk the Good Soldier or Nasreddin Hodja who mock and deride their exploiters; this type of character is well-known in world literature and was a very common figure in Soviet propaganda.

But the class-enemy image was not the only one and, in fact, there were not too many examples of that type of character in the anekdots. And, certainly, the enormous popularity
the “Smiles of different latitudes” column enjoyed in the 1970s was not due to such characters. To the contrary, we think that the popularity of this column was due, first of all, to themes and characters with which the reader might identify — perceived “universal”/”classless” characters, i.e. simple people, lacking special class markers, with human characteristics and playing common human roles — men and women, husbands and wives, naïve or naughty children, bosses and subordinates, and so on:

‘Why do you always quarrel with your wife outdoors?’
‘Because indoors my wife seeks peace.’ (1977, Nr 4)
‘Why you don’t possess a car, dad?’
‘Because I don’t have the money to buy one. But if you do well in school, you will surely buy one when you grow up!’
‘Then, dad, why were you so lazy in school?’ (1973, Nr 2)

Finally, the “classless” character might possess positive qualities. It is probably the most remarkable and most surprising thing that some characters who were obviously “strange,” “foreign,” “Western” or even stereotypical “capitalists” might possess positive qualities, too. Those characters might be “strange” not only from the point of view of names and other superficial markers but from the point of view of their behavior, mentality, character traits and abilities. None of this actually prevented the reader from sympathizing with such characters in these anekdotes.

Among the obviously “not-Soviet” characteristics we can list a sharp sense of self-respect and self-dignity; politeness and other special communicative abilities which might lead Soviet readers to feel envy or nostalgia; a sense of humor, irony, and, more importantly, self-irony/self-deprecation:

An apprentice barber shaving a client cut him several times. The poor man exclaimed:
‘If you were a fair man, you would give me a razor, so that I would be able to defend myself!’ (1973, Nr 24)

It is particularly interesting to analyze the speech of “not-Soviet” characters in many anekdotes published in the 1970s. Markers of “foreignness” in speech included excessive politeness and expressive phrases, decidedly not characteristic of Russian speech of the period:

A beggar is sleeping on a bench in the Luxembourg garden in Paris. At ten in the evening, the watchman wakes him:
‘Get up, monsieur, the gates are now closing.’
‘Thanks for warning me, old sport. Tell them to close them quietly because I am not a very sound sleeper.’ (1977, Nr 14)
The type we may call “almost ours,” different from the previous ones, displays characteristics usually attributed to the Russian/Soviet people — even as key characteristics. Of course, the “foreign realities” indexed in the examples below only thinly mask characteristics the Soviet public may see as Russian/Soviet. First of all, of course, are the anekdots about drunks. The overly correct, emphatically bookish and polite, “not-in-an-our-way” style of speech indexes “foreignness,” even though, of course, the “problem” of drinking in the USSR is well known:

An extremely drunk man is walking down the street. He addresses a girl passing by:
‘Tell me, mademoiselle, how many lumps do I have on my forehead?’
‘Three’, the girl answers, frightened.
‘Thank you, the drunk murmured, Thus, I have five more lampposts on my way home…’ (1972, Nr 21)

And finally, in many anekdots shortcomings characteristic for many of socialist society were mocked. Of course, when anekdots were about “brother countries of the Socialist camp,” nothing was surprising or unexpected. But when obvious Western realities were mentioned, such as the names, forms of address, social and professional positions, a strong sense of disbelief could be produced in the reader. One might conclude, in fact, that it was only the strength of the “iron curtain” which blocked such a sense of disbelief in many Soviet readers:

‘We are really highly in need of a new flat, Mr Municipal Inspector!’
‘Well, let us see…’
‘Our ceiling leaks so badly, that when it rains we have to mount windshield wipers on the TV screen to watch our programs’ (1973, Nr 2)

IMAGE OF THE AUTHOR/EDITOR AND THE READER OF ANEKDOTS

After discussing the themes of anekdots and characters, it is necessary to analyze the image of the author and the addressee of anekdots.

Such images were not formed immediately or spontaneously. They were created in relation to themes, characters, and the planned targets of satirical attack. The most important thing here was the choice made by the editors and publishers. The general images were created by casting the characters of anekdots in such a way that they would be perceived as negative role models.

At first glance, the most obvious image of authorship is one that represents Communist ideology and, thus, is committed to an unambiguously negative portrayal of all the
imperialists and their subordinates, the army, the politician; and, on the whole, the aggressive colonial policies and other ugly realities of capitalism.

So the reader, following the authors of the anekdots was led to draw the conclusion that censorship in the Socialist countries was necessary to protect the public. Furthermore, the reader was guided to perceive Socialist censorship as better and certainly more effective than Capitalist censorship, which was portrayed as entirely devoid of morality:

A censor after watching a movie:
‘How can you claim that your film has any educational value? What does it teach?’
‘Why, the film director exclaims in surprise, doesn’t it help one learn about women’s anatomy?’ (1974, Nr 7)

In fact, however, the image of the author and, of probably greater importance, the image of the addressee were typically not so unambiguous.

As we have already said, only a small number of anekdots published in the “Krokodil” magazine contained specific assessments of class differences. Naturally, the manifest image of the “very Soviet” reader was not consonant with reality. In the “Smiles of different latitudes” column there were many anekdots about “absolutely our own” realities. The reader who laughed at those types of “realities,” like the bureaucratic, the accommodation problems, the bad service situations, was undoubtedly most in tune with and most in accord with the real essence of the Soviet anekdot.

On the other hand, in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column there were many “difficult,” abstract and absurd texts which demanded considerable interpretative efforts. It is obvious in such cases that the reader had to have a great deal of experience participating in the telling and the interpretation of such texts in order to understand, for example, “difficult” anekdots like the following one:

A wife is sending a telegram to the husband who had left for the l’Azure coast: “Don’t forget that you are married.” Some days later she receives an answer: “The telegram was delivered too late.” (1976, Nr 33)

Overall, then, in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column a rather artificial image of the reader had been created, an image as artificial as was the anekdot column itself under strict editorial censorship. In essence, it was the result of an attempt to combine the folk, free laughter with the strictly politically defined satire. This attempt, of course, created numerous problems for both authors and readers, given that the real folk, free laughter naturally contradicted all official points of view (Bakhtin 2008).

In this regard, we call attention to the fact that the reader of the “Smiles of different latitudes” column was to be educated. This means the editors usually taught the reader and viewed their mission as a didactic one. Subtly and unobtrusively, they provided the reader
with enormous amount of information. They broadened his political and geographical outlook, introduced the reader to ideas about culture, literature, painting and other arts. The reader was expected to use various guides, dictionaries and encyclopedias when, for example, the reader encountered some unusual word:

An old lady tells her friends:
‘When I was a baby, a car knocked me down...’
‘Maybe, a fiacre?’ correcting her, asked one of the guests. (1978, Nr 11)

Thus, the image of the addressee of anekdots in the “Krokodil” magazine is not as unambiguous as one may assume. Certainly, it differs markedly from some assumed image of an adamant “Warrior for Communism” against all capitalist enemies.

In complete contrast to this, we may reconstruct quite a different image of the ideal addressee of the anekdot: a witty, self-ironical pessimist, who shares universal human values, and who, of course, does not share any aggressive, false, or inhuman features of Communist ideology, even though the reader is not strong enough to openly oppose these features.

The most general image of the addressee of anekdots in the “Krokodil” magazine is reminiscent of the image of that type of representative of the late-Soviet Russian intelligentsia made famous in the novels by Yury Trifonov and Yury Nagibin or in the songs of Bulat Okudzhava. Furthermore, in comparison to the contemporary image of the addressee emerging from the new anekdots of today, he or she was not so cynical, and not so indifferent to crucial political and social issues. The addressees of anekdots in “Krokodil” in the 1970s were relatively well-read, erudite, commanded a literary language, knew more than one system of etiquette, possessed a rather subtle sense of humor, knew many things about the native and world culture; and, in their free time, they broadened their knowledge base by reading numerous books, newspapers, and encyclopedias.

On the other hand, the image of the addressee of anekdots differed just as much from the image of the dissident as it did from the image of the “Warrior for Communism” As we have said, this image of the addressee was complex and multi-faceted, whereas the dissidents’ views were straightforward, unambiguous and lacked the same degree of complexity.

It is rather the real Soviet reader we may name who was most of all similar to image we have reconstructed here. And it follows that the diversity of themes and characters in the “Smiles of different latitudes” column was almost as broad and unrestricted as the portrayed reality itself was.
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STALIN JOKES AND HUMOR THEORY

ALEXANDER KOZINTSEV

The article, based on two recent collections of Stalin jokes, explores these texts from the standpoint of humor theory. The principal feature distinguishing most of them from satire is that they do not mock their ostensible target. Rather than expressing any relation to reality, they mock all the stupid ways reality can be represented. Viewed from the metalevel, these jokes are parodic in the broadest sense, which includes self-parody. They ridicule not only the official view of reality, but any other views of it as well, including the satirical view. The basic principle underlying these and all other jokes is the clash between the author and the intellectually inferior implicit narrator, who is the principal target of the jokes. As a result, the relevance of Stalin jokes for reconstructing either Soviet reality or people’s attitude to it is minimal, whereas their relevance for humor theory is considerable, since they highlight the contrast between satire and humor, specifically black humor.

Keywords: Stalin, jokes, satire, humor, parody

“No doubt laughter was in part an external defensive form of truth. (...) But it would be inadmissible to reduce the entire meaning of laughter to this aspect alone. Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth; it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils.” (Bakhtin, 1984 [1965], pp. 93-94)

“The humorous frame was not just an excuse for making covert criticisms of the regime but was essential to the enjoyment of these anecdotes (...) Good jokes cannot be reduced to what seem to be equivalent serious statements; they have an essential ambiguity all of their own.” (Davies, 1998, pp. 179-180)

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The first scholarly and nearly exhaustive collections of Stalin jokes, published in Estonia (Krikmann, 2004) and in Russia (Arkhipova & Melnichenko, 2009), provide a unique opportunity to address certain issues related to what might be seen as a quintessence of black political humor. In both books, two aspects of these jokes are discussed in detail: their relation to socio-political reality and their connection with the folkloric and literary tradition. The third aspect, however, one that concerns the functioning of these stories as humorous texts, is virtually left out of account, probably because it appears so self-explanatory. This aspect will be addressed in the present article.

The formal criterion distinguishing a joke from a non-joke is that the former usually has a punchline. Semantic mechanisms involved in the joke were variously termed “bisociation” (Koestler, 1964), “script oppositeness” (Raskin, 1985), “incongruity resolution” (Suls, 1972; Schultz, 1972), “appropriate inappropriateness” (Monro, 1951), “appropriate incongruity” (Oring, 1992), “local logic” (Ziv, 1984), “cognitive principle” (Forabosco, 1992), “logical mechanism” (Attardo, 1994), “frame shift” (Coulson, 2001), “surprise disambiguation” (Ritchie, 2004), and “pseudo-plausibility” (Chafe, 2007). In broader terms, the prerequisite of humor is the feeling of nonseriousness (Chafe, 2007), which is universally traceable not only in jokes, but also in humorous texts lacking the punchline. What exactly do we mean by saying that jokes in general and Stalin jokes in particular are not serious? What distinguishes black humor in general and Stalin jokes in particular from satire? Why are these texts irreducible to serious utterances (see epigraphs)? What accounts for their “essential ambiguity”? These are the questions that will be addressed in the present article.

In references to the sources of jokes, the following abbreviations will be used: “K” for Krikmann (2004), “AM” for Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009), and “ATU” for Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. If several versions of the joke are available, the shortest one is cited. Some jokes are abridged.

**TALES, ANECDOTES, AND JOKES**

_Someone asks a guide in hell: “Why does Hitler stand up to his neck in shit, while Stalin is only up to his waist?” He answers: “Because Stalin is standing on Lenin’s shoulders.”_ (K 6; AM XIV.2). In other versions, Stalin and Hitler are accompanied by Beriya, Goebbels, and Churchill. As Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009, p. 322) have demonstrated, the ultimate source of this joke is a 6th-century Byzantine parable: _And in a deep trance [the old monk] saw a river of fire, and a great crowd of people in that fire, and the brother [the monk’s lazy disciple] immersed up to the neck in the midst of them._ “Haven’t I begged you to avoid this punishment, my son,” the old man said, “by taking thought for the health of your soul?” “I give thanks to God, father,” he replied, “that at
least my head is at peace. It is thanks to your prayers that I am standing on the head of a bishop!” (John Moschus, The Spiritual Meadow, chap. XLIV, trans. by B. Baker); http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/patristictexts/173-moschus-meadow.

The motif of X allowing Y to stand on X’s shoulders and thus saving Y’s life occurs in modern Christian sermons. At the ACTS International site, I found this story told about two boys swallowed up by the waterlogged sand. The final sentence of the exemplum is “One loving brother gave his life so his brother could live.” (http://www.actsweb.org/articles/article.php?i=1200&d=2&c=1).

By contrast, the medieval tale is not quite serious, of course. In fact, it has a punchline and therefore can be formally classified as a joke. And yet it is miles away from the modern joke. A river of fire, fully appropriate in a religious text, is replaced in modern versions of the joke by prosaic substances such as shit (boiling shit in other versions), blood, or marsh. Humor theorists of the past described this device as “descending incongruity” (H. Spencer) or “comic degradation” (A. Bain). Also, while in the tale the situation fully agrees with both the author’s and the heroes’ religious mentality, irony notwithstanding, the modern joke builds on a striking disagreement between the quasi-Christian view of hell and the atheistic attitudes of the joke’s author’s, heroes, and listeners. In short, the modern joke appears to be parodic with regard to its precursor. Parodic throughout, indeed; take the idea of boiling shit as an “appropriately inappropriate” quasi-compromise between the boiling tar of “actual” hell and the profane substance available in the comically degraded inferno. The most important thing, however, is that this parodic contrast (between the religious view of hell and its travesty) obscures another contrast, believed to be the principal one — that between the official icon-like view of the leaders and people’s less than enthusiastic attitude toward them. As I tried to demonstrate (Kozintsev, 2008), such a double-edged parody deflects satire from its goals and turns it into play.

Stalin made a bet with Roosevelt on who of the respective bodyguards was more loyal. Roosevelt ordered his bodyguard to jump from the 15th floor. The man refused, saying, “I’m thinking of the fate that would befall my family.” Stalin gave his bodyguard the same order and he obeyed. Roosevelt asked Stalin why the man had done this, and Stalin replied, “He thought of the fate that would befall his family.” (K 11; AM VII.3). In earlier versions, the loyal bodyguard’s precursor was a Jew, whose last words before jumping were, “A terrible end is better than endless terror.” According to Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009, pp. 49-50), the joke stems from an anecdote about the kings of Poland and Denmark, and Peter I. The monarchs had ordered their respective grenadiers to jump out of the window on the third floor. The former two refused, whereas their Russian counterpart obeyed, but was stopped by the Tsar right before jumping.

Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009, p. 54) note that while the “migrant plots” remain nearly the same, the heroes’ motives change through time due to the changing worldview. True, but there is something else to these texts. Consider an Azerbaijani tale about Molla
Nasreddin and Timur (Kharitonov, 1986, No. 861). The ruler asked Molla if he was loyal enough to obey the order to jump into the sea. “Jumping into the sea for Your Majesty’s sake is a great honor for me,” Molla replied, “But first let me go and learn to swim.” The story can well be older than that about the three European monarchs, its prototype is unknown, and yet it is a joke, like the Soviet jokes. It likewise travesties the idea of a self-sacrificial feat performed out of loyalty. Whether Timur or Peter I or Stalin — the difference is immaterial, but what about the tyrant’s supposed victim? This is the only case where the hero’s humorous attitude matches that of the story’s anonymous author. In other words, this is humor, but not black humor, as in other cases (the anecdote about Peter I has no punchline and is thus not a joke at all).

As we see, it is not only that the same plot undergoes transformations in various historical contexts, but, more importantly, that the authors’ (and apparently the tellers’) attitudes can be different, in fact, diametrically opposed, in basically the same context. A serious or even tragic view of the situation and a comically degraded view of it are equally possible, the latter being necessarily secondary with regard to the former. In fact, these views are not mutually contradictory, as exemplified by ostensibly “anti-Soviet” jokes invented and told by the party elite (Arkhipova & Melnichenko, 2009, pp. 12, 22). The reason is not so much that jokes told by enemies should necessarily differ from those told by supporters, but that jokes, in the words of C. Davies, are “essentially ambiguous” and presuppose a “trade-off between didacticism and humor”: “…the Eastern European political jokes are primarily jokes; they were constructed with ingenuity and were an end in themselves” (Davies, 1998, p. 179). In broader terms, play does not contradict non-play. They can alternate, but they cannot overlap (Kozintsev, 2007a).

Clichés, Migrant Plots, and Intertextuality

When Stalin completed 25 years of his rule over Russia, he wanted a special postage stamp issued, with his picture on it. The stamps were duly released. Within a few days Stalin began hearing complaints that the stamp was not sticking properly, and became furious. He called the chief of the Secret Service and ordered him to investigate the matter. The chief checked the matter out and then reported on the problem to Stalin. The report stated: “There is nothing wrong with the quality of the stamp. The problem is, our citizens are spitting on the wrong side.” (K 4).

This is a truly floating joke. Krikmann (2004, pp. 73-81) has listed the following leaders about whom the joke was told: Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Clinton, Bush, Gates, Chrétien, Schroeder, Waigel, Sharon, Arafat, Hussein, Musharaf, Yadav, Mugabe, Patterson, Manning, Panday, and a number of football, volleyball, and hockey players, coaches, and entire teams.
My more recent search through the Internet has allowed to extend this list by including the following figures: Lenin, Gorbachev, Putin, Lukashenko, Yanukovich, Yushchenko, Ceausescu, Voerster, Howard, Trudeau, Blair, F.D. Roosevelt, Nixon, Obama, Hillary Clinton, Cheney, New Orleans Mayor Nagin, Harry Ainslinger of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, psychic and medium Sylvia Browne, Hezbollah terrorist Mugniyah, Zia-ul Haq, Arroyo, Mahathir, Vellu, Lee Kuan Yew, Bainimarama, Mengistu, Moi, Obasanjo, Obrador, and Castro. Collective targets include Indiana University of Pennsylvania faculty, US Federal Aviation Administration, the collaborationist government of Serbia in 1941, the junta in Burma, and, last but not least, the famous lawyers. Among the inanimate targets are the Microsoft logo and a Hindi inscription on a stamp issued in Tamil Nadu.

Fawners prefer to lick the portrait rather than spit on it. Leaders treated that way are Brezhnev, Putin, Yushchenko, Yanukovich, and Clinton, but, for some reason, not Stalin. No one cares whether or not stamps portraying all the persons listed above were actually issued or indeed whether or not the custom of placing the portraits of living politicians on stamps exists in the country referred to. If not, the difficulty is easily circumvented by saying that the stamps had been issued but were withdrawn from circulation for the reason explained above.

The prototypical text ("Ur-joke") may be as old as the tradition of issuing stamps with the rulers’ portraits. The following version has been recorded as “the old philatelists’ joke”: “The stamp doesn’t stick, your majesty; but there’s nothing wrong with the stamp itself, it’s just that your people are spitting on its wrong side!” (http://proteinwisdom.com/pub/?p=224).

Hardly many people living in the Internet age regard this joke as brand-new. Evidently its “logical mechanism” is liked so much that the pleasure of triggering it over and over outweighs the disadvantage of telling a hackneyed story, even in cases where no particular taboo is being violated. If so, the joke can be used as a proverb. Who would censure a proverb for being hoary? The following examples illustrate this intertextual use. Maryland football coach Chris Cosh said, “One day, they put your face on the stamp, the next day they spit on the wrong side. You’re only as good as your last win.” (www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/sep/14/front-seven-keeps-cal-under-pressure/). A visitor of the British religious blog Archbishop Cranmer asked, “Now when are we Atheists going to be represented, say by putting a picture of Richard Dawkins on one of the stamps?” To which his opponent retorted, “Perhaps his picture could go on the back of the stamp; I’d be happy to spit on it.” (http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.com/2007/12/uk-must-celebrate-christianity.html). Once such comment is made, it can be cited and thus regain the status of a joke, with a new target.

Another example of intertextuality shows that the ultimate source of a joke can be a proverb. At audiences with Molotov and Mikoyan, a Western reporter asked them why an inkstand in Molotov’s office was under the table, whereas in Mikoyan’s office it was on the
bookcase. Both gave the same answer: “It’s my inkstand, and I put it where I please.” At an audience with Stalin, the reporter told him of the occasion. “Jackasses!” said Stalin. “Then why did you nominate them to top positions?” “They’re my jackasses, and I put them where I please.” (K 188; AM VIII.8).

Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009, p. 212) note that the joke intertextually refers to so-called “Armenian riddles,” which were popular in the 1910s and 1920s, and were based on absurd logic. Q: “What’s green and hangs in the drawing room?” A: “A herring.” “But why is it green?” “It’s painted that way.” “And why does it hang in the drawing room?” “It’s my herring, and I hang it where I please.” As my search through the Internet has shown, the riddle is still alive. Sometimes it assumes the form of a question being asked to the Armenian radio, but more often the last answer is being used as a proverb. In the latter case, things to be placed where the speaker pleases include a bicycle, a motorcycle, an automobile, details of these vehicles, boots, galoshes, a basin, a samovar, a piano, a computer, ice cream, a piece of music in a show, etc. However, the “Ur-joke,” which may be the ultimate source of both the “Armenian riddle,” the Stalin joke based on it, and the modern saw, is a pre-revolutionary rhymed saying cited by Vladimir Dahl’ in his Dictionary: “Svoy klobuk, kuda khochu, tuda povorochu.” [It’s my cowl, and I turn it as I please]. The cowl (koukoulion) worn by Russian monks is a round hat that can indeed be rotated on the head.

In a more recent version of the Stalin joke, Stalin is replaced by Yeltsin; the reporter by the IMF delegation; Molotov and Mikoyan, by Kirienko, Chubais, and Nemtsov; and the inkstand by a computer mouse. All the rest is precisely the same (http://ruen.narod.ru/jumor/an_elcyn.html). The transformation shows how dangerous it is to use jokes as a source of information either about reality or about people’s attitudes to this reality. Take the comment made by the American journalist Eugene Lyons in 1935 with regard to the Stalin joke: “A more elaborate story does double service. It not only stigmatizes Stalin’s immense authority but impugns the intelligence of some of his lieutenants” (quoted after Arkhipova & Melnichenko, 2009, p. 214). Now, whatever one might think of Yeltsin, he could hardly be considered a dictator akin to Stalin. Likewise, while Kirienko, Chubais, and Nemtsov are considered rascals by many, no one in his right mind would call them jackasses. If anything, each of them surely knows the right place for a computer mouse. To use the terms of C. Davies, “the stupid” and “the canny” — those archetypal characters of world humor — can well switch roles provided the cliché is liked. This yet again illustrates one of the basic principles of humor — its form is more important than whatever is believed to be its content.

Q: Why did Lenin wear regular shoes, whereas Stalin wore boots? A: At Lenin’s time, Russia was still only ankle-high in shit. (K 10; AM I.3). The metaphor is still used in political discourse, as illustrated by the words of the Jewish activist Evgenii Satanovskii referring to the UN Geneva conference against racism, boycotted by Israel, the US, and certain other Western nations, but not by Russia: “Russia has remained knee-deep in dung… You can’t easily enter a room to meet people wearing neat clothes and polished shoes when
you’re wearing boots smeared with pig dung.” (http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/m.150161.html). This trope is used not only in Russia. Jeff Danziger’s cartoon published by NYT Syndicate in October 2004, at the final stage of the US presidential election campaign, shows Uncle Sam putting on boots for the same purpose (http://www.danzigercartoons.com/archive/cmp/2004/danziger2169.html). According to Arkhipova and Melnichenko (2009, p. 74-84), earlier versions of the Soviet joke use another metaphor, this time with a positive connotation: Stalin needs boots to cross the political marsh (an allusion to the Marsh in the French Convention). This suggests that by contrast with the “satirical” use of the metaphor, motivated by the content, the “humorous” use is primarily motivated by the formal device, whereas the content arbitrarily provides a quasi-motive.

At a meeting in the Kremlin, Stalin said, “Come on, comrade Beriya, we have very good doctors. Take the professors.” They were indeed taken on the same night, and this is how the doctors’ trial began (K 229). While the joke is hardly related to Henny Youngman’s famous one-liner Take my wife — please in a direct way, both show that play with the form of expression can motivate the content. Both jokes have emerged out of thin air of linguistic signs; they are about polysemy rather than about Stalin, his oppressive regime, or someone’s wife.

Once at a party congress Stalin was speaking when somebody in the hall sneezed. “Who sneezed?” Stalin demanded. Silence. So he made the first row stand up and had them all shot. Then the second row. Eventually, someone near the back of the hall called out to confess. “Bless you, comrade,” Stalin answered (K 1; AM V.18). Clearly, the only actual person other than Stalin who could feature in this story is Hitler, and indeed the same joke about him circulated in the USA. In one Soviet version, Stalin’s role is played by the militiaman who does not harm or threaten the passengers on a bus, but asks the same question in an ominous voice. In another version, Stalin is replaced by the teacher, the congress delegates by pupils, and shooting, by giving failing grades. Perhaps the most exotic version is the one I found in the Internet. Here, the role of the sadistic dictator is played by Voldemort from Harry Potter novels. Instead of shooting his supporters, he pronounces the killing curse Avada kedavra (http://wworld.borda.ru/?1-11-0-00000032-000-60-0).

Stalin answers children’s questions at a primary school. Petia says, “I have three questions. First, who killed comrade Kirov? Second, why are our people so poor? And third, why are human rights so often violated in this country?” The bell rings for recess. When the meeting resumes, Stalin asks children if any of them has questions. Vovochka says, “I have five questions.” He repeats Petia’s questions and then says: “Fourth, why did the bell ring 20 minutes early? And fifth, where’s Petia?” (K 48). Compare this with the American version: At a primary school, George Bush offers to answer some of the children’s questions. Bob says, “I have three questions. First, why did the USA invade Iraq without the support of the UN? Second, why are you president when Kerry got more votes? And third, what happened to Osama Bin Laden?” The bell rings for recess. When they resume, George asks
the children if anyone has questions. Steve says, “I have five questions.” He repeats Bob’s questions and then says, “Fourth, why did the bell ring 20 minutes early? And fifth, where’s Bob?” (http://www.communitywiki.org/odd/JokesWiki/Jokes). Whatever happened to Bob (possibly nothing compared to what befell Petia), the joke does not care about realism as long as the structure is preserved.

The following joke has been recorded only in English; no exact Russian parallels are known to me. A man walked into a bar and saw Hitler and Stalin, so he asked the bartender if they really were Hitler and Stalin. The bartender said: “Oh yea, that’s them alright.” The guy then walked up to them and said: “Hey, guys, what are you two doing?” Hitler said: “We’re planning on killing 14 million Jews and one bicycle repairman.” The guy then looked confused: “Why do you guys want to kill one bicycle repairman?” Stalin then immediately looked at Hitler and said: “See, I told you, nobody would care about the 14 million Jews!” (K 292). The same story was told about Bush, Cheney, Powell, Rumsfeld, Blair, and Musharaf, while the Jews were replaced by Iraqis, Afghans, Pakistanis, and Koreans. The story evidently originates from a wisecrack in Stanley Kramer’s film Ship of Fools. A Nazi supporter claims that Jews are to blame for all of Germany’s ills, to which the Jewish man replies: “Yes. Jews and cyclists.” The Nazi asks: “Why the cyclists?” The response: “Why the Jews?”

This joke circulated in Russia as well, but with a modification which reversed the meaning of the wisecrack. A caller asks Radio Yerevan: “I saw a billboard that said, ‘Beat up all the kikes and the bicyclists.’ Tell me please: Why the bicyclists?” (http://volokh.com/posts/1198601502.shtml). The last rhetorical question is omitted, and the meaning becomes diametrically opposite. Indeed, if the punchline is “Why the Jews?” the joke sounds anti-Nazi; but if this sentence is deleted, and the punchline is “Why the bicyclists?” the joke becomes anti-Semitic, and the effect is enhanced by the use of the disparaging slangy word. This reversal is discussed at the Yahoo blog, where the former version (from Ship of Fools) is cited as Polish, and the latter as German from the pre-Auschwitz times (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GreenLeft_discussion/message/62264).

While both jokes can be regarded as ironic or satirical, the Stalin and Hitler joke based on the same scheme is neither; it is black humor pure and simple. This yet again illustrates the “essential ambiguity” of the jokes, which in Davies’s words, “can be used for all manner of conflicting purposes, or none at all” (Davies, 1990, p. 130).

Whereas the next joke, which is rather popular, appears different, it employs the same scheme. Putin conjures up the ghost of Stalin and asks him how he can consolidate his power. Stalin advises as follows: “Step 1. Kill all the democrats. Step 2. Paint the Kremlin blue.” Putin replies: “Why blue?” Stalin replies: “Aha! I knew you wouldn’t ask about step 1.” (K 24; http://volokh.com/posts/1198601502.shtml).

As noted by Eugene Volokh (see preceding reference), the logical scheme here is the same. One absurd act (killing the bicycle repairman or the cyclists or a clown, as in another
version) is paradigmatically replaced by another (painting the Kremlin blue). By comparison, the second act (killing the Jews or the democrats) appears either likewise insane (as in the “anti-Nazi” wisecrack from Ship of Fools) or self-explanatory (as in the “anti-Semitic” question to Radio Yerevan or in the joke about the ghost of Stalin).

Compare this with the British version of the latter joke: The ghost of Stalin visits Gordon Brown in a dream. Brown takes advantage of the apparition and asks Stalin for some advice. “The UK economy is on the edge of total meltdown. Comrade Stalin, what should I do?” Stalin puffs on his pipe and says, “I would advise two measures: first, round up all the bankers in the UK and shoot them. Second, paint Downing Street blue.” “Why should I paint Downing Street blue?” Brown asks. “Ha, that is what I thought; the first measure needs no explanation.” (http://ukhousebubble.blogspot.com/2008/11/paint-downing-street-blue.html?referer=sphere_search). A weaker version, featuring G.W. Bush and requiring a less radical measure, circulated in the USA: The president is in the basement of the White House and having a breakfast, so he asks FDR’s ghost, “FDR, I am in deep trouble with my cabinet and they make me look bad, what can I do?” So FDR says, “You can either fire them or paint the White House blue”... and Bush says, “So then I will paint the White House blue”... and FDR shoots back, “I knew you would take the easy way out.” (http://forums.macrumors.com/showthread.php?t=223296).

Stalin, who could not swim, bathes in the Black Sea and begins to drown. His compatriot saves him. Stalin asks, “What reward do you want?” “Don’t tell anybody I’ve saved you. That’ll be my reward.” (K 39; AM IX.5). Various versions of this story were told about Kalinin, Khrushchev, Yeltsin, Hitler, Nixon, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Alabama football coaches, and Spike and Angel — heroes of Joss Whedon’s TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel. The earliest known version dates back to 1924: A naval officer fell overboard. He was rescued by a deck hand. The officer asked his preserver how he could reward him. “The best way, sir,” said Jack, “is to say nothing about it. If the other fellows knew I’d pulled you out, they’d chuck me in.” (http://www.snopes.com/humor/jokes/nixon.asp)

Is it possible to imagine anyone worse than Stalin or Hitler? Some jokes say yes. Trapped in a lift you have a gun and two bullets. In the lift with you are Stalin, Hitler, and a bodhran player. What do you do?” — “Shoot the bodhran player twice. Can’t take chances.” (K 87). In other versions, the prospective victims are the corporal, the conductor, Bill Gates, and, sure enough, the lawyer.

**Theoretical Issues**

It appears that the examples cited above suffice to give a single answer to all the questions asked in the Introduction. What, then, distinguishes Stalin jokes from satire? Why are they irreducible to serious judgments? Why do they appear ambiguous? And, generally,
what do we mean by saying that a text is not serious? The answer may sound strange, but if we avoid it, we won’t be able to understand why black humor makes us laugh when its supposed referents make us shudder. The answer is very simple: Stalin jokes are not about Stalin. And, in a broader sense, black humor (and humor at large for that matter) is not about its ostensible referents. If the referent of humor coincided with the ostensible referent of the joke, we would by no means find any of these stories amusing.

In the words of Christie Davies (1998), “(e)ven the most virulently ‘anti-Soviet’ jokes at the expense of the founding fathers of the Soviet Union, who were the heroes of its supposed civic religion, can and could be told in a way that merely played with the absurd heroic official view of these icons” (p. 178). This means that jokes are parodic, and their referent does not coincide with that of the parodied serious text. In fact, their referent is not part of reality, whether actual or imaginary; it is the parodied text itself. It may be the “absurd heroic official view,” but it may as well be any serious view of reality, including the subject’s own view.

If semantics is the relation between the text and whatever it denotes, then it must be admitted that humor has no semantics. There is nothing paradoxical or unusual about this: parody, too, has no semantics. What does have semantics is the parodied text, whereas the sole purpose of parody is to undermine this semantics without suggesting an alternative. By the same token, the sole purpose of humor is to undermine any semantics engendered by the subject’s relation to the object; for it is this relation that humor playfully parodies. Humor is pure negation; however, rather than negating the reality to which it seemingly refers (this is what satire does), humor only negates the ways reality can be represented.

It might be argued that parody, being an apophasic affirmation of propriety, should contain more not less meaning than the inappropriate original. This is not so. Humor disables the subject’s serious relation — any relation — to the object. Wallace Chafe (1987) called this the “disabling mechanism.” The object provides only a superficial pretext for disabling any meanings and playing with empty envelopes of former signs. According to Kant, humor is “play with representations of the understanding, by which nothing is thought” (Critique of Judgement, § 54). Therefore the object of humor is neither reality nor imagination, but solely the way language is used.

In terms of the joke’s functions, the comparatively realistic “Stalin” is indistinguishable from the fictitious “Stirlitz” — an apparent chimera engendered by linguistic play. Like the trickster myth, from which it originates, the joke is not satire, but a parody of it. The “serious” position of a humorist, unlike that of a satirist, is indefinable. It simply doesn’t exist, because humor has no objects in the external world. In other words, humor is not a cognitive, but a metacognitive phenomenon, based on pure reflection. Humor is basically parody in the broadest sense, which includes self-parody (Kozintsev, 2007a). Therefore there is no point in discussing what attitude toward Stalin the Stalin jokes express. The serious attitude of the jokes’ authors, tellers, and listeners to this figure could fall
anywhere in the range from love to hatred. But during play this attitude was parodied in the same way as was the official view.

This false bottom, the parodic quality of jokes, is generally overlooked, and scholars study them as if jokes were serious texts having referents in the real or possible worlds. Statements such as “People hate Stalin / wish death upon him” (a chapter heading in the book by Arkhipova and Melnichenko) refer to stereotypes used in jokes, not to the actual state of affairs or the joke tellers’ attitudes. It is not that that jokes reverse the meaning of a stereotype, transforming it into an opposite, but equally serious stereotype like “People love Stalin and wish him long life,” but that “good jokes cannot be reduced to what seem to be equivalent serious statements” (Davies, 1998, pp. 179-180).

As Olga Freidenberg (1973 [1925], p. 497) puts it, ancient parody does not make fun of the gods, but rather mocks us — “in fact, so skillfully that we still take it for comedy, imitation, or satire.” The same applies to the so-called “mocking” of political leaders (or rather their comic doubles) in jokes. Stalin of the jokes is but Stalin’s comic double, a mock god, a mythical trickster, a homonymous clown superficially resembling his prototype in appearance and mannerisms. Whatever concerns this phantasmal image is in no way leveled against the actual Stalin. And if anyone prefers to consider these jokes satire, then it is a satire on an absurdly distorted view of tragic reality — much like Hogarth’s Satire on False Perspective.

By the same token, Chukchi or Polish jokes are not about the Chukchi or the Poles; they are about a fool’s view of these peoples. And, of course, dead baby jokes are not about dead babies; they are about some unidentified cretin who relates bloodcurdling things in an absurdly inappropriate manner. Not the object’s alleged characteristics, but solely the subject’s own simulative stupidity is the true object of humor. The central feature of humor, then, is self-parody rather than incongruity or ambiguity per se. The prerequisite of humor is the clash between the author and the “implicit narrator” (neupomianutyi skazchik; the term introduced by V. Shklovskii in the 1920s). According to modern narratology, the figure of the implicit narrator is present in any literary text. In serious texts, however, the incongruity between the author’s and the narrator’s viewpoints does not amount to a clash. Polyphony, which, as Bakhtin has demonstrated, is inherent in Dostoevskii’s works, was part of the writer’s design. Humorous texts, by contrast, are based on the clash between the two opposed viewpoints — that of the author and that of the intellectually inferior implicit narrator, culminating in the collapse of the latter’s design. The text is humorous insofar as it is self-parodic, i.e. aimed against the implicit narrator.

This, it appears, is where the Superiority Theory of humor finds its proper place: not at the joke level, where the target is sometimes hardly identifiable (is it Lenin on whose shoulders Stalin is standing? Or the visitor to Inferno? Or the professors to be “taken”? Or Beriya, who got the cue, after all?), but at the metalevel, in the gap between the viewpoints...
of the author and of the implicit narrator, who is always present and is always inferior to the author.

Jokes, unlike satirical texts, never mock their ostensible targets; their true albeit hidden targets are implicit narrators. However sadistic Stalin might be, he would hardly have the entire audience of his supporters shot row by row only to bless the one who has sneezed. This is not simply a hyperbole, for a hyperbole can be tragic; this is a parody of the implicit narrator’s preposterous account of gruesome events. Those who consider jokes a source for studying politics and public opinion often mention the ambiguity of these stories. But serious stories, too, can be ambiguous, which does not make them funny. The distinctive feature of the jokes is that they are not so much ambiguous as parodic. And it is hardly productive to use parody as a source of knowledge about the reality to which the original refers or even about the original itself. If, on the other hand, the story is perceived as hyperbolic rather than parodic, as in the joke about the man obeying the order to jump from the 15th floor, then, in the words of C. Davies (1998, p. 179), “the very strength [of the story] undermines its potential as a joke... there is necessarily a trade-off between didacticism and humour.”

It is sometimes said that jokes are about stereotypes not about reality (Gruner, 1997, p. 79). About stupid and primitive stereotypes, one should add; for this is a sine qua non for the joke to be funny. Examples illustrating the absurd ease with which joke characters paradigmatically interchange in the implicit narrator’s mind were cited above. To be sure, “migrant plots” are possible in serious literature. Thus, Maupassant borrowed the plot of Turgenev’s Mumu for his Mademoiselle Cocotte. But still these are entirely different stories, whose characters are by no means interchangeable. In jokes, by contrast, a virtually identical story is being told about vastly different characters over and over with a truly mechanical monotony. Changes are minimal. Thus, in the joke about the leader’s visit to a school, Stalin is asked questions about Kirov and human rights, whereas Bush is asked about Kerry and Iraq. The leaders themselves, however, are as similar as monozygotic twins.

Or take the following joke. X gets on the table to change the light bulb. Y advises him to stand on the newspaper. “No need,” X replies, “I’ll reach the bulb just fine.” How primitive the stereotype used by the implicit narrator must be to let X stand for both the legendary Red Army commander Vasilii Ivanovich Chapayev (http://humor.post.su/?catid=22) and the Israeli top politician David Levi! (Salamon, 2007). This interchangeability may prompt a sociologist or a historian to look for features shared by the referents. For an anthropologist, however, the question is of secondary importance, since having become the joke’s characters, actual persons turn into mythical tricksters, whose behavior might present an inconceivable amalgam of stupidity and canniness and neutralize all sorts of oppositions (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 224-226; Kozintsev, 2007b).

At first sight, jokes are no more primitive than metaphors and proverbs, since the same metaphor and the same proverb, too, is applicable to vastly different people and events. Some jokes indeed resemble extended metaphors and proverbs. I have cited examples of
such an intertextual use (apparently, the shorter the joke, the more likely the convergence). There is a critical distinction, however: if properly used, proverbs and metaphors do not attempt to sound stupid. There is no pretense in them. Humor, by contrast, is pure pretense. Even when being ostensibly leveled at an external target, it is invariably also aimed at the subject himself, specifically, at one of his hypostases — the implicit narrator. This split intentionality (or double “aboutness”) is what accounts for the ambiguity of the jokes. The joke always backfires some way or another, whereas proverbs and metaphors do not, and if they do, they become jokes. Spitting on someone’s image on a stamp means nothing else than expressing hatred for that person; but only a direct descendent of the mythical trickster could do this to the detriment of his own practical interests (mailing a letter). Note that in both above examples of the non-humorous (proverbial or satirical) use, the motif of being unable to affix a stamp is either toned down or absent.

Bergson, who based his theory of humor on the “mechanical inelasticity” of comical heroes and their similarity to marionettes, had overlooked a much more important aspect — the feigned inertness of the implicit narrator of the humorous text. Indeed, many jokes look as if they were invented and reproduced by illiterate peasants if not brainless marionettes or automata. This is not due to the folkloric nature of jokes as opposed to individual literary works. Proverbs are neither parodic nor funny. Certain genres of the so-called “post-folklore” (the term introduced by S.Y. Nekludov with reference to late urban quasi-folklore), for instance, schoolgirls’ hand-written albums, while being naïve and abounding in trite clichés, are serious and not at all parodic. They may appear stupid and funny to us, but not to their creators. In other words, the author and the narrator do not clash; in fact, they are indistinguishable.

Modern urban jokes, too, are part of post-folklore, but they are another matter. They circulate among intellectuals, who are undoubtedly able to tell Stalin from Bush, Mikoyan from Chubais, and Chapayev from Levi, but pretend to be illiterate peasants. The pretense may be so crude that some jokes appear plainly idiotic rather than naïve. Suffice it to recall a joke about a Georgian (sic) who was injured while trying to throw an old boomerang away (Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002, p. 45). Of course, this was initially told about an Australian aborigine, but the interchangeability rule may hold even in such absurd cases. Sometimes the narrator appears as stupid as the joke’s butt; and the listener, who feels likewise duped, makes no attempts whatever to find out who he is laughing at, as it happens when we laugh at children’s or folk jokes.

The modern joke can indeed borrow age-old folkloric schemes without enriching them in any way. For example, the “anti-Soviet” joke, sometimes attributed to Mikhail Zhvanetskii, about people’s attitude to the authorities (“They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work”) is none other than folktale motif Make-believe eating, make-believe work (ATU 1560). But even if the joke sounds “intellectual” and even if its motif is borrowed from a literary work, the treatment level is hardly much higher than in other cases. Take a
joke about a Chukchi who is reading Hegel (or Kommersant newspaper or a statistical text) whereas his reindeer are falling one after another off the cliff into the sea. The Chukchi comments: “Tendentsiiia, odnako!” [“A tendency, I’ll be darned”]. The plot is borrowed, evidently, from Innocents Abroad by Mark Twain, where Judge Oliver, into whose underground house at first mules fall one after another and then a cow, says, “This thing is growing monotonous!” (the intermediate source may be Freud’s Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, where Twain’s example is cited). The interchangeability notwithstanding, the highly individualized Judge Oliver is one thing, and the idiotically stereotyped “Chukchi” is another.

The notion of “descending incongruity,” or “comic degradation,” which many humor theorists discussed in the past, is widely considered outdated. Very few recognize that degradation is the sine qua non of humor (Apter, 1982, p. 180; Wyer, Collins, 1992). The mutually opposed scripts and frames, which most modern specialists believe to be the key element in the perception of jokes, are objective and equally serious, whereas the subjective incongruity — that between the viewpoints of the author and of the implicit narrator, who is inferior to the author — remains in the shade. This contrast can be seen only from the metalevel, not from the level of the joke itself. Therefore, whatever is described as “semantic mechanisms of humor” concerns the quasi-serious structural envelope of the joke, but not humor proper. To understand humor does not mean to understand the ostensible meaning of the joke (at least, not only that); for this would mean adopting the implicit narrator’s position. To understand humor means to adopt the author’s position, to view the joke from the metalevel, and to enjoy it the same way parody is enjoyed. According to a modern psychological theory, “incongruity resolution” is merely a pretext for discovering that the only thing that makes sense in humor is nonsense (Ruch & Hehl, 1998). All the quasi-semantic mechanisms leading to this discovery are but pretext inaptly invented by the implicit narrator.

This, indeed, appears to be the sole purpose of what is described as “incongruity resolution,” “logical mechanism,” “local logic,” “surprise disambiguation,” etc., and what is often erroneously viewed as the essence of humor (see Introduction). Rather than merely linking two objective scripts, the mechanism highlights the implicit narrator’s inaptness and thus introduces the subjective descending incongruity. For instance, in the joke about Stalin’s (or someone else’s) image on a stamp being the target of spitting, the logical mechanism turns Stalin’s haters into helpless dupes unable to affix a stamp. It is these imaginary dupes, not Stalin, who are the butt. The preposterous story undermines the implicit narrator’s didactical design, turning him into yet another target and thus exposing the author’s true design. As it turns out, it is not satire, but a parody of satire.

Likewise, the story of someone standing on someone else’s shoulders in a quagmire can be perfectly serious; in fact, it can be an exemplum referring to self-sacrifice. But if it refers to the tortures of the damned, then the punchline revealing that one sinner is standing
on another, who has thus deserved an even harsher punishment, not merely inverts the two objective scripts at the joke level (condemnation vs. alleviation), but introduces a subjective descending incongruity at the metalevel (intended didactics vs. resulting profanity), and thus backfires on the inapt implicit narrator. If the listeners agree to enjoy the joke as they enjoy parody, the subjective incongruity becomes all-embracing. This feast of collective feigned stupidity and self-parody is what Aristotle meant when he described the comical as “imitation of inferior people.” Isn’t humor the reinstatement of the archaic rite, whereby all the cultural meanings were temporarily suspended or reversed? Isn’t this the truth which, according to Bakhtin, laughter unveils?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks are due to Arvo Krikmann and Yuri Berezkin for their helpful comments and to Alexandra Arkhipova for the permission to use her unpublished manuscript.

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“KROKODIL” IN TRANSITION:  
THE CASE OF BUREAUCRAT CARTOONS

ALEXANDER KOZIN

This article focuses on the cultural meaning of the bureaucrat cartoon, which is a thematic subgenre of the ‘social ill’ cartoon published in the Soviet satire magazine “Krokodil” (1924-1992). The study is previewed by Vladimir Propp’s theory of comism and laughter. With the help of that theory the article shows the origin of the comical in cartoon as well as cartoon’s relation to anekdot. The analysis of the bureaucrat cartoon in the second part of the article is guided by the key tenets of ethnography of communication. Among the findings of this study are the structural components, functions, and the rules of configuring the bureaucrat cartoon toward it becoming a ‘matter of risibility’ as well as a matter of cultural symbolism. In addition, the study demonstrates some adjustments that had been made to the image and cultural meaning of the bureaucrat during the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet cultural space.

Keywords: cultural artefact, symbolic form, configuration, ethnography of communication, Propp’s theory of comism and laughter

As a visual form that dwells in the midst of a specific cultural space, cartoon presents its reader with a dense commentary on the world and its specific manifestations, in this case, status and value of the Soviet civil servant, the bureaucrat. The extent and depth of this commentary can be easily overlooked: at first sight cartoon communicates but little. This is no wonder, for the visual aesthetics of cartoon are directly connected to its etymology: in the language of art history, ‘cartoon’ is a sketch made on a sheet of thick crude paper, a technique utilized by the artists since the early Renaissance for outlining the compositional strategy for a forthcoming painting. The trace of the original relationship can still be detected in the cartoon’s appearance: largely schematic, two-dimensional, and

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monochromatic, the modern cartoon has retained the old sense of a study. At the same time, the modern cartoon has evolved into a phenomenon of its own: its size (miniature), medium (popular publications), thematic (everyday affairs and behaviors), and purpose (solicitation of laughter) suggest that cartoon is a self-sustained cultural artefact created to produce a certain social impact. In order to understand the production of this impact, I employ the theory of comism and laughter by Vladimir Propp (1895-1970). Drawing upon elements of his theory, I wish to establish that cartoon and anekdot are made to produce the same effect: cause laughter. However, in order to produce that effect, they configure (comicalize) matter in different ways, and Propp provides us with a general understanding of how and why these differences should matter for this study.

**CARICATURE: A MATTER OF RISIBILITY**

From the contemporary point of view, the choice of the first theoretic may appear questionable. Indeed, Propp (2002) is rightfully considered one of the founders of Russian formalism. From this perspective, his structuralist allegiances could present a hindrance to our analysis; however, this is only the case if we equate these allegiances with the entirety of his method and thus ignore numerous extensions, elaborations, and revisions of formalism post his famous treatise on the morphology of the Russian fairy-tale. His theory of laughter is one such elaboration. One of the latest works written by Propp (2002), “Some Problems of Comism and Laughter” was published posthumously in 1976 and republished in 2002. However, despite the fact that it was incomplete at the time of publication, the work itself is sufficiently lucid in showing a decisive move away from the static universalist approach characteristic for the early Propp (2002) to the emphasis on the specifics of particular cases.

For example, when outlining his aims about the subject of the comical, Propp (2002) makes the following programmatic statement, “we need to investigate the specifics of comism in each separately taken case for its duration” (p. 7) (all translations here are mine). This quote clearly acknowledges both the importance of the conditions that make some matter rather than other comically affective and the need to identify these conditions by examining specific evolutionary paths. In addition, Propp (2002) accepts discourse as the foundation of all meaningfulness and therefore refuses to make any significant distinctions between visual and spoken means of producing laughter. For him, saying is showing and showing is saying. This is an important point for the theme of the special issues as it means that anekdot and cartoon relate to each other through narration, coinciding in some narrative strategies and diverging in others. Since Propp (2002) strove to create only a basic theory that relates comism to laughter, he did draw on various narrative forms but without finding it necessary to isolate either anekdot or cartoon for a focused examination. The task of this section is not to compensate for this omission but rather to introduce a frame for the subsequent analysis.
From the outset, Propp (2002) suggested that all laughter could be divided into two groups: those produced through parody and those that require a kind of exaggeration. The difference between the two operations was formulated as follows: “Parody imitates the external features of a phenomenon [which obscures the essence of the phenomenon], while exaggeration brings into the open this or that characteristic to make it stand for the whole” (p. 66). In other words, parody configures, while exaggeration refigures. The former has a repeat in it, the latter implies a reversal, and although Propp (2002) admits that there is always a mutual contamination of both in producing a specific comical artefact, neither anekdot nor cartoon tends to parody. This is quite understandable when it comes to anekdot, as all of its species have one thing in common: they build up toward a surprising ending. As far as the modern cartoon is concerned, despite the fact that its predecessor, caricature, parodies rather than exaggerates, it also takes surprise for a change-of-state. One may say that in both cases surprise caps the activity of telling with laughter being a part of that activity: a successful telling not only culminates in laughter, which can be taken for non-verbal evaluation, but generates an explicit evaluation (e.g., “oh, that is really funny”).

Even anekdots with a long beard may solicit laughter if the teller manages to create an impression that the punch line at the end evolves from the preceding whole to such an extent that it generates a surprised expectation merely from the manner of telling. In comparison, those cartoons that have a caption function in a similar way, completing the act of ‘reading’ with a surprise and the accompanying laughter. Reading a cartoon is therefore akin to telling an anekdot because it too involves a sequential production of meaning. At the same time, this production in a story, and I consider anekdot to be a subcategory of story, should be distinguished from the sequential production of meaning in an image. Two different ways of telling match two different ways of interpreting what is being heard as opposed to what is being seen and/or read. In cartoon, we begin with the visual, starting from the background, placing the figures against it and then reading the caption. From this perspective, the caption can be taken for a part of the image and sometimes even appears as such in the form of ‘speech balloons,’ which represent both thoughts and speech. This is to say that in cartoon the image and the text work together to produce a context/text relationship, where the image stands for the context, while the caption provides the temporally preceding image-context with an appropriate text-figure. It is from this relation that the term ‘figure of speech’ emerges.

According to Propp (2002), figures of speech or ways of configuring speech and/or image for both anekdot and cartoon are produced by the operation of exaggeration, which is also subdivided into three categories: “exaggeration can be of three different kinds—caricature, hyperbole, and grotesque” (p. 66). The difference between the three kinds can be formulated as follows. Caricature focuses on one particular detail and then brings it to the fore, so to speak, in order to achieve laughter. It exposes this characteristic metonymically by showing a detail, which creates an appearance of a whole. In order to achieve this effect,
caricature enhances the already exaggerated feature, without leaving the realm of the probable however. In comparison, hyperbole exaggerates differently: by taking “an unexpected or new characteristic, it enhances it to an improbable size” (p. 69). Hyperbole’s favorite figure is simile. Propp’s (2002) example of a hyperbolic simile is ‘walking like an elephant.’ Finally, grotesque makes the matters excessive by adding an emotional dimension. An object of grotesque is always presented in an unpleasant way. It causes caustic laughter which could be defined in conversation analytic terms as disaffiliative.5 Using an example from Propp (2002): an image of the defeated enemy, such as the Napoleonic troops fleeing from Moscow dressed up in peasant clothes that were confiscated from the ransacked Russian villages, appears grotesque and thus pitiful. In the bureaucrat cartoon, we can find all three kinds of exaggeration. In the analytic section, I will address all of them in a greater detail. As for anekdot, it necessarily involves a hyperbolic exaggeration; it also can engage caricature (e.g., by imitating someone’s voice or non-verbal behavior), and, if we accept Propp’s (2002) typology of laughter, some anekdots would indeed be told to solicit “bad laughter” (e.g., political anekdots about V.I. Lenin or his associate F. E. Dzerzhinsky); these deal with grotesque.

For Propp (2002), the most common object of exaggeration is the human being, and here again cartoon and anekdot have much to share. As opposed to nature, which cannot be a subject of laughter, the human being is an infinite resource in this regard. As if previewing an objection, Propp (2002) makes a disclaimer: although in addition to the humans, both anekdots and cartoons commonly exhibit animals, their depiction is always anthropomorphic. A pig or a duck are not comical by themselves, but they can become comical when certain human qualities are assigned to them. Drawing heavily on the Russian tradition of literary satire, which has a long history of utilizing comical images of animals (e.g., Krylov, Saltykov-Schedrin, Bulgakov), Propp (2002) explains a special relationship between human and animal subjects of laughter by connecting exaggeration to the figure of simile. With the help of this combination, the teller or cartoonist can bring the comical matters, such as the body size, shape, facial features, and certain animal-like acts or features, to the fore, so to say. Importantly, this operation works on both the human being and the animal. This is because, explains Propp (2002), an animal can be made to look like a human being and vice versa: “the relationship between the animal and the human in comism is based on mutual transformation” (p. 57).

An even stronger comical effect is produced by turning a human being into a human object. In comparison to the human-animal transformation, in this case, exaggeration employs metonymy: “The entire comism of the puppet theatre is based on this kind of depiction” (Propp, 2002, p. 56). By turning a human into an object, the puppet theatre often helps establish the generic nature of an all too prominent social position. Stripped of any identifying features, a mechanical doll is a perfect vessel for laughter. This might explain why politicians, aristocrats, historical figures and certain culturally-designated figures often
become subjected to this very kind of transfiguration: by appearing on stage as a ‘tsar’ or a ‘policeman,’ they do not require to be named, only shown as a symbol for a certain social position, regardless of whether this symbol refers to power in general or a particular kind of authority (e.g., moral, economic, executive, sovereign). Professionals fall into that category as well. Thus, Propp (2002) finds cooks, hairdressers, doctors, and sailors to be the professions most exposed to laughter. Some of them are ridiculed more than others, and this more or less is dependent on those stock cultural values, which prove to be essential in each particular case and for each particular historical period (the Russians do not laugh at sailors as much now as compared to the times when Russia was an emergent maritime nation). This emphasis, on culture as an essential condition for the production of laughter, makes Propp (2002) claim that “there are no comical characters per se” (p. 176). In order for a character to become fully comical, so to say, it must be configured in accordance with the value system of a specific culture. In the long run, it is this system that “assigns laughable qualities to a description” (Propp, 2002, p. 67).

Granted, there are many universally recognized human characteristics that provoke laughter regardless of their cultural origin. Avarice, pride, stupidity, deception, cowardice, lust are just a few such qualities. In Propp’s (2002) theory, these qualities comprise the category ‘immoral.’ Given the many observed differences in the understanding of morality, it should not be surprising that different cultures ‘prefer’ to laugh at different qualities. In addition, in different cultures, “moral laughter,” is associated with specific pre-set genres (e.g., epigram, лубок, burlesque, clownship, etc.) and is given in a specific ‘key:’ for example, ironic, sarcastic, humorous, carnivalesque, etc. Both cartoon or anekdot are hardly an exception in this regard. For example, while both cartoon and anekdot are known in the United States and in Russia, the pervasive nature of anecdotes is immediately visible only in the Russian social context, while cutting out cartoons and putting them on display is a cultural habit that manifests itself stronger in the US context. This is to say that a specific culture utilizes the preferred genre and the key to bring about certain necessary refinements to a potentially laughable quality, making this or that quality less or more moral and therefore more or less laughable. Moral/immoral values are assigned not only to prominent people, but to entire ethnic groups: the Russians prefer to laugh at the native inhabitants of the Siberian North (гуква) because of their alleged stupidity, while some white Americans tell jokes about the Native Americans accentuating the same feature. The choice of a laughable ‘neighbor’ is not essential for this study however. More important is that Propp (2002) does not focus on the racist character of ‘ethnic’ jokes but explains instead that it is essential to understand why some characters become comical and others do not and what value system is responsible for the creation of one cultural emphasis rather than another.

I take this emphasis as an invitation to extend the above theoretic to an ethnographic examination. I therefore would like to ask: What cultural values make a particular character—such as a bureaucrat—comical? and, co-extensively, How does a particular
medium of communication—such as cartoon—comicalize the bureaucrat? In order to answer these questions, I employ ethnography of communication which is going to help me identify and evaluate the elements and processes that govern the production and transformation of the bureaucrat cartoon in a specific ethnographic field, the Soviet humor magazine “Krokodil.”

METHOD: ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

The choice of ethnography of communication is stipulated by three reasons: the method’s encompassing character, its strong analytical schema, and a focus on the community. The latter is defined as a cohesive social group characterized by specific ways of speaking. From the beginning, Dell Hymes (1974), the founder of ethnography of speaking, conceived of it as “a synthetic discipline” whose task was “elaborating on a community’s ways of speaking” (pp. 67, 47). In the schema offered by Hymes (1974), the two definitional concepts, way of speaking and speech community, branch out into elementary units, such as fluent speaker, speech situation, speech event, speech act, and finally, a stratified list of components of speech (message form, message content, setting, scene, speaker, addressee, audience, purpose, key, channels, styles, norms, and genres). To complete his analytical framework, Hymes (1974) names rules of speaking and functions of speech (pp. 45-65). When systematically engaged, this schema reveals a local culture as “a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 8). With this definition, Philipsen (1992) compacts but also streamlines basic Hymsean insights, freeing the original method from certain eclectic tendencies and old structuralist allegiances, turning it into a strict qualitative method with a special emphasis on the historically coded properties of culture-in-communication.8

In its expanded version, ethnography of communication is embracive of all forms of communication, including visual artefacts.9 It therefore benefits our examination directly in several ways: first, by demonstrating the cultural value of a communication artefact, regardless of its materiality and second, by showing the place of this artefact in a local communication system. Hymes (1974) himself cites numerous examples in which the key to the cultural code is actually inscribed in a non-human component: “a rock, a thunder, or a flock of birds” (p. 111). The ethnographic research on the role of images in the constitution of personhood (e.g., Katriel & Philipsen, 1981; Rosaldo, 1982) as well as the studies of “boundary objects” such as diaries and scrapbooks (e.g., Basso, 1974; Katriel & Farrell, 1991) testify to the actual applicability of the method to an examination of a physical object. The relation between the ‘self’ and the image of the self are echoed by Carbaugh (1992) and Rosaldo (1982). For example, the study of the Illongot’s speech acts makes the latter claim that the process of self and other constitutions allows one “to be judged” in the culture-specific terms of “sincerity, integrity, and commitment actually involved in his or her bygone
pronouncements” (Rosaldo, 1982, p. 218). The same can be said about a cartoon which “judges” the self by showing this self from the moral perspective. In his study of joking, Hymes (1974) connects the moral side of laughter to “speech acts” (p. 52). Now that I have argued that cartoon should be considered as a visual form for producing comical effects, we can expect that it too would feature speech acts which can be defined as comicalizing. These speech acts are similar to rhetorical tropes, except that rhetorical figures pre-figure laughter in the formal sense of the word, while speech acts constitute local means of delivering laughter. Expanding speech acts to communication acts brings cartoon and anekdot in close proximity through the notion of speech community as “social entity, social group characterized by ways of speaking” (p. 67). Similarly to attending to a joke in the course of a conversation or any other form of oral interaction, the encounter with the printed cartoon is eventful. In part this is to do with the possibility of encountering a cartoon in the absence of an audience. At the same time, although the reader may be the only participant in this encounter, there is always an anticipation of sharing a laughing experience with a larger audience of the general readership. The presupposition of a larger audience endows cartoon with the ritualistic properties of a “communication event.” From this perspective, reading a cartoon is akin to any other communicative activity, which “is directly governed by the rules or norms of use in context.”

In this respect, the affective immediacy of the small genre is particularly attractive for an ethnographic study “aimed at disclosing the ways of patterning of communicative behavior as it constitutes one of the systems of culture” (Hymes, 1974, p. 67). I have already mentioned that, unlike other temporally extended or technically complicated media, cartoons “act” on the reader explicitly and immediately in a manner of con-figuration. The process of con-figuration is based on what produces the effect of ambiguity by first selecting a figure, whether it is a figure of speech or a particular human identity, which is both affected by and affecting culture by creating what Hymes (1968) calls “patterning” (p. 107). Then, following culture-specific means of communication, this figure becomes en-fleshed and, if it is intended to produce laughter, it should produce it or die out. From the diachronic perspective, as this investigation intends to show, cultural patterns do not remain the same for the duration of multiple generations. Advances and transformations in cultural routines and their codes undergo relatively regular renewals. Most of the time, these changes are incremental; however, when prompted by sudden socio-historical shifts (World War II, collapse of the Soviet Union, National Liberation Movement), they become highly visible. The change of emphasis for the bureaucrat cartoon in this analysis reflects the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and the subsequent restructuration of the society toward a new perspective on the comical, and even though the form of its delivery (cartoon, anekdot) remained the same, the comical matter itself did indeed change.

Therefore, in the subsequent analysis I seek to first decipher the cultural pattern (code) of the Soviet Bureaucrat cartoon by focusing on the visual and textual aspects of the image,
culturally-specific rules of its organization and presentation, as well as basic cultural premises and moral values. The examination is motivated by the expectation that the sum of these foci adumbrates the cultural style of presenting the Soviet bureaucrat as a social, aesthetic, and rhetorical artefact designed to perform a unique cultural function. Second, I would like to trace the transformation of the Soviet bureaucrat into a corresponding post-Soviet figure. In accordance with the direction of the selected methodological procedure, I begin with a general ethnographic description of the bureaucrat cartoon. The specific aim for the following section is to isolate “the basic dimensions and features, [...] taxonomic categories” (Hymes, 1974, p. 41). On the basis of these features I reconstruct the process of figuration which leads me, in the final stage of the analysis, to the meaning of the Soviet bureaucrat as a cultural figure endowed with a particular symbolic value for the socio-historical period under examination.

THE BUREAUCRAT CARTOON

The choice of the bureaucrat cartoon for the following analysis is stipulated by several reasons. From the sociological standpoint, the figure of the bureaucrat is ambiguous. This ambiguity is sufficiently strong as to enable us to think of bureaucracy as a quasi-profession: bureaucrats receive no formal training, their areas of expertise are limited to the tasks at hand. Their decision-making power is also limited to these tasks; yet, the informal power concentrated in the hands of the bureaucrats is at times enormous and is often subject to gross mishandling and abuse. These features make the bureaucrat appear as a recognizable social ill in many cultures. In the Russian context, the bureaucrat has been in the focus of satirical attention before, during, and after the 1917 Revolution. However, in the life of the bureaucrat cartoon, the Soviet period stands out. Not only satire was declared to be a weapon of class struggle by the founders of the Soviet State back in the 1920s, Vladimir I. Lenin himself found it necessary to found “Krokodil,” which was conceived as a humor magazine for the masses. It also happened to introduce these masses to the Soviet bureaucrat as a social pariah.

In the beginning, during the first two decades of its existence, “Krokodil” looked more like a pamphlet (20x15 cm in size). It was printed on brown pulp paper and rarely exceeded ten pages. In 1948, after it had been determined that the magazine’s WWII propaganda campaign was a decisive success, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) took special interest in reviving the publication. “Krokodil” was ordered to be published biweekly; its circulation reached 5 million copies, making it the largest humor magazine in the world. It also grew in size (30x50 cm) and volume (circa 30 pages). The main mission of the refurbished publication was defined as follows: “With this weapon of satire the magazine must unmask embezzlers of Socialist property, grafters, bureaucrats, and any instances of bragging, sycophancy, or banality” (CPSU NA, 1948, pp.
The new mission brought about a change of the printed contents. In addition to feuilletons, the magazine began to feature stories, poems, and cartoons. The first cartoons closely resembled propaganda posters. They were caricatures in the strict sense of the word, showing grotesquely looking capitalists riding in gigantic limousines next to emaciated ladies in ridiculous outfits. In 1961, under the new editorship, the magazine began to publish cartoons in a separate section, featuring 10-15 cartoons per issue. It is about that time that the bureaucrat cartoon began to appear with a steady regularity. Given the growing bureaucratization of the Soviet society at the time, this prominence should not be surprising. From that point on a heartless, greedy, and rude bureaucrat became a constant subject of ridicule, in other words, a theme of its own. In the figure below we can observe this very subject on the front page of the 1965 issue of “Krokodil” (see Figure 1).

The bureaucrat here is depicted as a burly middle-aged man with distinct pig-like features. He is sitting at the desk with a cigarette in his hands, looking somewhat bored and certainly self-important, full of himself. In the middle of his chest, right where one expects to see a tie, there is a key hole. The actual key lies on the desk. The key chain is held by the bureaucrat himself. The cartoon caption reads, “People say that I am not empathetic. Of course I am not! I keep all my empathies in check!” I take this cartoon as paradigmatic for the entire subcategory and not only because it appears on the magazine’s front page. The main reason for opening the analysis with this very cartoon is the immediacy with which it offers its subject for ridicule. This is remarkable already because it exposes the dual nature of the Soviet bureaucrat. It might be worth remembering that by virtue of their sensitive position, most bureaucrats were members of the Communist Party, so their critique could have had political implications; however, the cartoon succeeds in drawing a clear-cut distinction between the bureaucrat who is a member of the CPSU, and the bureaucrat who simply performs his professional duties; and since the former is only implied, while the latter is presented explicitly, bureaucrat’s professionalism overshadows his political affiliation, making it irrelevant for the purposes of comism.
The cartoonist describes the professional side of the bureaucrat by way of his business suit, official desk, body posture, attitude, and some attributes of the office. The overall comism is however configured in the fantastic key. The key hole in the bureaucrat’s chest, which “keeps all the empathies in check,” gives us an instantaneous meaning of the bureaucrat’s essence, its inhuman, mechanical nature: the bureaucrat is a man-object in the precise sense intended by Propp (2002) (see the above theoretic). In turn, the key as the symbol of hiding things inside also connotes a mechanism. Obviously, a mechanical person cannot be empathetic. Moreover, to emphasize certain traits of the Russian cultural symbolism, the hollow chest indicates the lack of a soul. By juxtaposing the literal and the metaphorical meaning, the cartoon gives us the bureaucrat as a soul-less person. Despite its provisional nature, this characterization gives us a guiding clue into the subsequent analysis which intends to expand and refine the relation between the image and its symbolic cultural meaning. Following the methodological sequence suggested by the ethnothography of communication, starting with the background, or context, and proceeding with the figure, I suggest that we examine the setting first. With Hymes (1974), I understand setting as a place for action, which creates the necessary conditions for enacting “particular behaviors” (p. 112). In this definition setting is equal with context: I however suggest that we understand the latter in the Gestalt terms, as a relationship between figure and ground, including all the adjacent or relevant environment (e.g., frame as a constitutive part of a picture).

4.1 The Setting

In the original “Krokodil,” the caricatured bureaucrat tends to appear in two different settings. One shows the bureaucrat at home, as it were, in his or her office. The other takes the bureaucrat outside. We can also identify a historical split between the two depictions: one belongs to the Soviet period of “Krokodil,” the other can be called post-Soviet. The two settings are different, but not unrelated. They are united by the image of the bureaucrat who appears to be quite similar to the paradigmatic burly middle-aged man in Figure 1. It is as if the post-Soviet bureaucrat managed to adapt to his new role in the wake of the Soviet collapse. We can observe this difference in a sample of 134 Bureaucrat cartoons that appeared in “Krokodil” between 1973 and 1992, 112 of which featured the office for the primary setting. The rest of the cartoons showed the bureaucrat in various domestic situations (still performing a bureaucrat) or, as is the case with the post-Soviet bureaucrat cartoon, assuming some form of leadership. The latter theme makes for the second largest subcategory of the bureaucrat cartoon. As for the primary setting, from the two categories of the bureaucrat cartoons, the Soviet one has the majority of the sample represented by the office; in turn, the office is represented by the desk, while the second category represents leadership by way of placing the bureaucrat outside of the office, in the open, as it were. I illustrate the difference between the two settings by offering two sets of the bureaucrat cartoons, the Soviet and the post-Soviet.
4.2 The Soviet Reign: At the Desk

When the bureaucrat is encountered in his natural environment, he almost always sits at the desk. Although the desk can be drawn differently by different artists, the bureaucrat’s desk is easily recognizable as a period piece. During the Soviet era, it used to populate all the governmental structures, including the military and the police. A close relative of an ordinary writing desk, a standard office bureau was nonetheless different; it even boasted a ‘classic’ design. Although the quality and size of the desk varied depending on the organization and rank of its occupant within that organization, the design was always the same: in all its variations it replicated the original English bureau that can still be seen in Lenin’s study in the Kremlin. Although hardly antique, the desks for top bureaucrats were quite impressive: made of dark expensive wood, they would often feature ornamental woodwork. Most interestingly, their top would be covered with green or red ‘billiard table’ cover. The latter feature would designate the item as ‘handle with care’ and ‘for official use only,’ making it a symbol of power and thereby inappropriate to display in any other context of the Soviet life but the administrative one. The primacy of the desk versus the bureaucrat’s formal attire becomes obvious if one is to consider their relationship. The desk comes with the place-position, while the suit and tie come with the person-position. In other words, the attire stands for the person in a general way, connoting a sense of the official, while the desk stands for the office (post), which connotes a sense of the officious.

In addition to its metonymic showing, the desk can signify through the figures of synecdoche, metaphor, and irony. Synecdoche comes into play when the desk is shown standing for the activities that take place exclusively in the office. In the bureaucrat’s office, nothing happens, at least there is no visible activity outside of signing or, more often, not signing any papers. At the same time, the bureaucrat is always at his desk. One “Krokodil” cartoon from the general sample represents a bureaucrat who is grown into the desk in the manner of a tree. In another cartoon the bureaucrat is shown sleeping behind the desk sitting on the cases which are literally labeled as “dormant.” The habit of cutting to the desk in representing the bureaucrat’s office means that other features of the office space are irrelevant for the figure-specific setting. In a sense, the desk stands for the entire professional bureaucracy of the Soviet kind. Irony comes to identify with the bureaucrat’s desk through etymology: the Russian word for ‘bureaucrat’ (бюрократ) is a homonymic relative of the word ‘bureau’ (бюро). That is, as a professional, bureaucrat is named to be literally a part of the object. More important however is the symbolic value of the desk that signifies the divide between the world of the ordinary people and the extra-ordinary world of the bureaucracy. However, by virtue of the object itself, the other side of the ordinary is not as clearly defined. It is clear however that the desk separates the bureaucrat from the rest of the people, presupposing an encounter between the two worlds; hence, the following two perspectives on the profession (see Figures 2 and 3).
The first perspective belongs to the owner of the desk, who clearly dreams of himself as being in a position of enormous power. Some bureaucrat cartoons designate this position by showing the desk as long as the landing strip, high as a mountain, or so massive that it completely conceals the person sitting behind it. In Figure 2 the owner of the desk is depicted in the traditional pose of Napoleon Bonaparte: his chin is pushed upwards, his right hand is stuck underneath the lapel of the suit, while the upper part of the chair is designed to resemble the Napoleon’s military hat, creating yet another impression of a human object. The creation of such an image is made possible by a rare trope, which can be conceived of as a subspecies of synecdoche. The bureaucrat is sitting in the chair that signifies a part of his clothes. In turn, the clothes refer to the imaginary double, the great military leader, but also implicates the person who has come to stand for a comical character flaw—megalomania. The bureaucrat suffers from this ailment to such an extent that he appears grotesque.

The incongruence between the two senses, grandeur (i.e., effectiveness and achievement) and bureaucracy (i.e., boredom, routine) creates a hyperbole, turning the bureaucrat into a comical figure. The origin of comism is disclosed by the common knowledge that the bureaucrat is anything but grand. Figure 3 demonstrates this premise from the perspective of the seeker, who comes to the bureaucrat from the common world. The vertical strip shows the result of this encounter: a growing frustration of the seeker contrasts with the steady and unflinching attitude of the bureaucrat. The standing position of the visitor designates an uneven distribution of power. The visitor, who is essentially a client, is being treated as a subject of the enthroned bureaucrat. However, it is from the lower position that he ends up landing his fist on the desk, crushing it, and, with it, the very owner who virtually falls apart together with his officious prosthesis. The symbolic value of this gesture is difficult to escape: when a proper force is exercised, it turns out that there is nothing to the bureaucrat to resist it. He is as empty as a clay pot, and as easy to break. Together, the two cartoons provide us with two additional characterizations for the bureaucrat: on one level, he is mechanical and empty; on a different level, he is self-inflated and insecure (again, easily breakable). These characterizations belong to the cartoons of the
Soviet era; at the same time, they also characterize the figure in the post-Soviet period. However, the post-Soviet period sees a significant change.

4.3 The Post-Soviet Move: On the Pedestal

From the outset, it is important to note that the break between the two periods, the Soviet and post-Soviet is not as clearly delineated as one might expect: the same cartoonists continued their work after the collapse of the USSR, and the same themes continued to function as comical. Still, a noticeable transfiguration can be observed in each and every figure. The next set of the bureaucrat cartoons is particularly significant in that respect because it demonstrates what happens when the bureaucrat steps out of the office because it shows how the absence of action turns into the presence of this very absence, which happens when the bureaucrat speaks or sets himself in motion. Then, he becomes political. When the bureaucrat steps out of his office, he makes sure to elevate himself, as it were. We know that it is the bureaucrat, for the way of the carton is the way of the actual re-distribution of positions in the post-Soviet political arena. The society did not get re-bureaucratized, as would have been the case if the change concerned only the composition of the government but not the regime of governance, it underwent a full restructuration.

A direct participant in this process, the former top-ranking
bureaucrat with a Party membership did not find any use of his skills except in the sphere of politics. However, in order to make the transition, he had to move himself out and into the open, to be with the people, his new object of attention, and subsequently elevate himself over and above the people. In Figures 4 and 5 we see two kinds of self-elevation, both take the bureaucrat over and above the ordinary people who merge with the bureaucrat providing him with a means of transportation, as it were. In neither case however is the confluence complete: the division between the ordinary world of the laypeople and the extra-ordinary world of the bureaucrat remains to be seen, and so does the object of this division. In Figure 4, the desk transforms into a set of bird wings; in the next cartoon, the separator is the rolling pedestal. When outside, the bureaucrat is no longer a desk-bound paper-pusher, he is a leader of truly monumental proportions.

In both cases, he leads and is being lead by his own people, his former clients, who continue to seek guidance, except that this time they are not after a signature or stamp, but rather a cause. In Figure 4, he is being flown by the people to the stars; in Figure 5 he is being dragged by the people some place ahead. In either case he himself stays motionless, over and above the people, moved by the people. Their imminent demise is of no concern because, as before, his cause is the absence of a cause. As his predecessor, he is empty of both intention and will. By way of a provisional summary, we might say that the essence of the Soviet bureaucrat in the post-Soviet bureaucrat cartoon becomes modified, albeit only by way of adding another negative characteristic. With the bureaucrat at the helm, suggest the cartoons, the people are doomed to be burnt by the sun, fall into the abyss. The absence of a cause on the part of the leader symbolizes betrayal, which a cardinal failure of morality. The bureaucrat of the Soviet times was hollow; the new bureaucrat is hollow as well, except that when he climbs on the pedestal; then he adds a character trait to his profile; he becomes an impostor, who does not know and does not care but keeps the pretence of both.

Certainly, the bureaucrat is not the only professional turned politician during the post-Soviet cultural transition; moreover, few were at the time. Yet, unlike other professionals, including professional Party members (аппаратчики), who underwent radical
transformations as to their objectives as well as the means of achieving thereof, the bureaucrat who became a politician remains a bureaucrat: character-wise, he is still empty, static, and egotistical. Despite his assumed leadership, as was indicated by the cartoons, he retains the behavior of doing nothing that characterizes the generic bureaucrat. A slight difference applies however: the Soviet bureaucrat does nothing without involving others, while the post-Soviet one avoids action by delegating it to the very people he used to mistreat and ignore. The new version of the bureaucrat is still suffering from *mania grandiosa*, and he still requires an appendage to move around. Yet, his dreams are those of explicit rather than implicit power. The pedestal or the wings become the new means that serve the old ends. Signifying the merger of the Soviet bureaucracy with the post-Soviet autocracy, the bureaucrat as a politician is emptiness in motion. The latter ensures his anonymity even when he steps out of the desk. With this characterization we are able of refining the first cultural sense of the bureaucrat as a soul-less being. After due considerations, we could identify the lack of the soul with the lack of the self: hence, the machine-like inhuman figure of the bureaucrat. But if we accept that the bureaucrat has an empty self, we should ask ourselves, *Who or what moves him in the first place? What is his modus operandi?* The last cartoon offers us an answer to this question.

As is seen in Figure 6, the answer is paradoxical; yet, it could be expected from the previous theoretic, Propp’s (2002) insistence that person-object should be taken
as a puppet in the context of the puppet theatre. The manipulator becomes the manipulated, which is a demotion for a place of power. In the above figure we see a person who, hiding behind a partition, is manipulating a puppet made in the image of himself. The part of the puppet, which is called ‘sleeve,’ is represented by the pedestal. The symbolic meaning of this image is clear. The pedestal conceals the moving mechanism of the bureaucrat, his perpetuum mobile, or his real self. Here we discover the key to the cultural meaning of the profession. In this bureaucrat cartoon the bureaucrat is not himself, but a simulacrum of himself. He hides himself and moves an image of himself while remaining behind the scenes. This presupposes an absence of a coherent self. Moreover, we might suspect that this absence is dictated by the requirements of the bureaucrat’s position. In this respect, significant is the setting for this appearance, a portable puppet theatre, where the main and only actor is an anonymous other who chooses to remain invisible, while the main and only actor appears to be a miniature copy of his master, and it is he, the copy, who is being presented as an actual leader pointing somewhere out there into some distant future which cannot come true, just like the words of the puppet cannot come true. The wooden boy has no future. In this cartoon we encounter the bureaucrat as an apotheosis of emptiness, for behind an empty figure there can only be an empty world.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the original tasks set out for this essay: 1) problematize the phenomenon of cartooning in terms of its socio-cultural effects; 2) systematize and utilize Vladimir Propp’s (2002) theory of comism and laughter in order to establish the relation between a comical image and its effects (although in passing, this section also contrasts and compares cartoon and anekdot); 3) advance Propp’s (2002) theory to the analytical plane with the help of ethnography of communication by describing key features, including the rules, premises, and functions, of the bureaucrat cartoon; 4) on the basis of the latter, suggest how and to what an extent the Soviet bureaucrat cartoon “participates in the maintenance of social systems, cultural values and personality systems” (Hymes, 1968, p. 110); finally, to identify the ways of transformation and transfiguration of comism, if any, that the bureaucrat cartoon could undergo during the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet cultural space.

Among the findings of the first order of analysis was the role of the bureaucrat for the Russian culture in general and its standing in the Soviet humor magazine “Krokodil,” in particular; the second order of analysis disclosed the significance of the setting for the Soviet bureaucrat cartoon. It appeared that the preferred visual setting for the Soviet bureaucrat cartoon was the office, and specifically the office desk. The desk was taken as a symbol of the divide between the ordinary world of the ordinary people (visitors, seekers, customers), and the extra-ordinary world of the bureaucracy. It also helped configure the bureaucrat as a
soul-less man-object, a common representation of the comical. A further investigation of the bureaucrat showed that in the post-Soviet period, the official desk transformed into a pedestal or other means that both elevated him above the ordinary people and set him in some kind of motion. Despite this transformation, on display, the bureaucrat remained vain and indifferent, vacuous, inept, and devoid of a true self; hence, the unkind laughter that accompanies the appearance of this inhuman mechanical puppet. In conclusion, on the basis of the above findings, I would like to suggest that for the Russian public the cultural significance of the bureaucrat is inscribed in its dominant quality—immorality.

ENDNOTES

1. For those interested in this connection, see Cappel (1992).
2. The birth of the modern cartoon can be traced to James Gillray (1756-1815), who established caricature as an alternative to the traditional visual arts. In turn, “Punch” (1841-) can be taken responsible for both making cartoon accessible to the general public and also turning it into a visual artefact par excellence: the cultural habit of cutting out cartoons for collection or display originated in England at the end of the 19th century as a result of the popular appeal of “Punch,” as it is argued by Kintzle (1983).
3. As far as their systemic relationship is concerned, I side with Permyakov, who argued for an image to be the foundational structure for all forms of folk expression: “proverbs, fables, fablettes and didactic tales reveal all their external and internal structure through concrete images” (1979, 71).
4. Since an anecdote does not belong to the oral genre exclusively, it would perhaps make for a stronger comparison if the ‘reading’ of published cartoons gets juxtaposed to the ‘reading’ of written anecdotes. Unfortunately, this kind of comparison, although valuable in itself, exceeds the objectives set for this examination.
5. For the original conversation analytic work on laughter, see Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1977); Jefferson (1979, 1984).
6. We might add to this list doctors, lawyers, and of course bureaucrats.
7. These generalizations are based on consistent occurrences of this kind of joking that the author himself observed during his fieldwork on Indian reservations in South Dakota. In turn, Basso (1979) shows the reverse way of generating laughter, by the Apache Indians, who ridicule the White Man as “socially incompetent” (69).
8. By now a classic in the field, Philipsen’s ethnography of speaking in Teamsterville demonstrates a full potential of ethnography of communication by showing, for example, that a working-class American community considers enacted speech appropriate for male self-presentation, however, only in “assertions of solidarity but not in assertions of power over other people” (1975, 18).
10. It is hardly an accident that Basso (1979), who studied the ways of joking by the Western Apache Indians about the Whiteman, found it necessary to include a series of cartoons in the interpretative section of his book. The laughable figure in these cartoons is the Whiteman. The kind
of laughter directed at him is undoubtedly moral: they present the Whiteman as ‘naïve,’ ‘superior,’ ‘imperious,’ ‘greedy,’ etc.

11. The earlier point about the popularization of cartoons through cut-outs also supports this claim: by putting a cartoon on one’s office door or pin-board, its owner invites accidental or deliberately chosen spectators to share laughter with them.

12. In this form, the magazine persisted until 1991, when it was first annulled and then reorganized as “The New Krokodil.” The latter lasted for less than two years replaced by an array of thematic humor publications, such as “Around Laughter” or “Smekhach.”

REFERENCES

THE WORLD OF POLITICS IN
THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL ANEKDOT

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This article is an attempt to study how the world of politics is conceptualized in modern Russian political anekdot. The paper starts by discussing the importance of political anekdot in the Russian culture of the XX century. We then review the status of anekdot as a secondary genre of political discourse, and describe the major themes and characters in Russian political anekdot. Further, the article looks at anekdots about Vladimir Putin in order to reveal the manifestation of values, peculiar to this genre, and to disclose the cognitive mechanisms of humorous/satirical transformation of political reality.

Keywords: political discourse, secondary genre, incongruity, reduction, hyperbolization, grotesque exaggeration, carnivalization

It is believed that political anekdot goes back to short stories — the so-called “historical anekdots” about life, morals and manners of Russian sovereigns and eminent personae of the period. These first political anekdots narrated curious details of appearance, character, habits, actions and statements of political leaders (Dobrinskaya, 2001).

As pointed out by E. Shmeleva and D. Shmelev (2005), Russia at the turn of the 20th centuries can be described as a typical bourgeois society with all political freedoms; a society in which political humor belonged to newspapers and magazines whereas folklore embraced only obscene or politically incorrect anekdots (ethnic, sexist etc.). Beginning with the 1920s the disappearance of free press made telling political anekdots a widespread feature of everyday communication. In the 1960-70s, when telling anekdots became less dangerous than in the previous decades, they turned into a mass genre, which to a certain degree replaced discussing political news: all types of anekdots (about family relations, everyday life, different ethnic or social groups) were essentially anti-soviet, that is exactly why they...
were told. The Shmelevs also mention that after the perestroika, the lack of an “anti-Soviet ingredient” caused many Russian speakers to perceive anekdotes as less funny than they used to be.

Russian political anekdot is traditionally considered by scholars to belong to urban folklore, the folklore of intelligentsia. Intelligentsia, as a social class, has always resorted to the written form of conveying their experience. However, “Communist Russia was a closed society where all normal civil institutions practically stopped functioning and trusting your life experiences to paper under such conditions was both risky and pointless. Therefore intelligentsia had to find uncontrollable and uncensored means of storing and communicating information. Creating folklore texts proved to be such means in totalitarian society” (Dobrinskaya, 2001, p. 192).

A common view is that political anekdot in totalitarian society performed the function of a safety valve which allowed, at least partially, to let loose the spontaneous protest of masses, to release the ideological pressure. “In a way humor compensated for the lack of freedoms” (Issers & Kuzmina, 2000). Thus, it is not accidental that the prevailing type of anekdot in Soviet time was political anekdot.

It has been observed that during the period of the greatest freedom in the early 1990s, political jokes essentially vanished in Russia: “The very reason for their existence disappeared. It was no longer necessary to whisper together in the kitchen if people could go out onto the street and shout whatever they felt like” (Kozma, 2003). It seems plausible to assume, that the number of jokes about this or that leader is indicative of the degree of freedom under them: “In this regard, Vladimir Putin is threatening to break the record set by the all-time joke leader - Leonid Brezhnev” (Kozma, 2003).

Some analysts claim that anekdot is peculiar to Russian culture and this genre, especially political anekdot, is a major contribution of Russia to the world culture of the 20th century. It manifests the split consciousness very typical of the national mentality: doing everything, as one should, and at the same time observing it from the outside, always keeping the ironic distance between the official lie and the actual state of affairs (Bykov, 2006).

Russian anekdot often ridicules political hypocrisy wittily summed up in the humorous maxim of the late Soviet period “We pretend to be working as you pretend to be paying us.” Such a state of affairs provoked parallel existence in two logical worlds; a kind of cognitive dissonance, a split of consciousness between what is observed, what is thought, what is said at home and what is said at work.

Political hypocrisy is satirized in the following joke, which continues the tradition of the Soviet-time anekdot presenting the power elite as only interested in self-enrichment and maintaining their own well-being, not caring a bit about the ordinary people (whose interests are always proclaimed to be the major goal of the government):
President Vladimir Putin has released a new program for reform. Its first goal: “To make people rich and happy” (List of people attached).

V. Khimik (2002) points out two major sources of political anekdote: on the one hand, the emergence of anekdote as a genre of urban speech is rooted in the culture of the elite. On the other hand, its popularization and development was stimulated from below, by traditional folk culture.

Anekdot is rightfully regarded as belonging to folklore since its basic features coincide with those of traditional genres of verbal folk art typical of peasant culture. These features are as follows: 1) anonymity; 2) oral form of communication; 3) synthesis of verbal and performing arts; 4) multiple reproduction from one narrator to another, resulting in variation; 5) ties with popular ludic culture (Kagan, 2002; Khimik, 2002).

Political anekdot, together with other genres of humor and satire, belongs to the marginal layer in the semiotic space of political discourse. Genres of political humor (caricature, parody, joke, anekdot) should be regarded as secondary texts in relation to the core genres of political communication (political debates, statements and comments by politicians etc.). They are secondary because they are always generated in response to some primary political text, they are meant to interpret and evaluate the primary texts. The conceptual and informational structure of a secondary text is by default more complex than that of a primary one. Thus, it can be assumed that those who operate with secondary ludic texts in their political discourse practices activate more complex cognitive structures in processing political information Here I side with K.Gregorowicz (2009), claiming that the audience of political humor is more politically sophisticated and knowledgeable and has much denser connections between political objects and more interconnected political schema than those who are exposed to more linear political information.

Among the theories underlying the study of the appeal and effect of political humor there are theories of humor that can help to explain how political humor affects cognitive structures beyond merely learning political facts. Of special interest in this respect is incongruity theory which suggests that humor engages complex cognitions in a process of puzzle solving. The cognitive mechanism of humor consists in the realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation (what is expected within a certain frame of reference) and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept. The cognitive dissonance resulting from the clash between incompatible scripts or contexts is compensated by laughter. Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage (Kriemann www; Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985).

Thus, the following anekdot (2) is based on putting together two incompatible frames that normally do not intersect — those of political election and armed robbery.
(2) 

Election is going on at the State Duma. Putin’s candidature is announced. Enters Putin with a machine-gun. -Hands up!... One hand down!... Unanimously. (= Unanimous vote).

In (2), Putin’s appearance in the Duma is presented as an armed attack designed to force a unanimous vote in his favor. The humor is brought about by the interplay of two gestures: hands up as a gesture of surrender and one hand up as a gesture of voting. Normally the voters just raise one hand to say “yes” — here however “one hand up” is the result of bringing down one of the two raised hands. We normally expect the command “Hands up!” to be followed by demonstration of physical power and dominance (arrest, imprisonment, robbery, execution etc.). So, when Putin sums up the result of the “voting” it produces the effect of failed expectation and, consequently, causes humorous response.

Anekdot (3) is a bitter satire on Putin’s attempt to present Russia as a democracy. The humorous effect is achieved due to the clash of incompatible frames — furniture and instruments of execution (realized through verbal pun based on the polysemy of the noun chair).

(3) And finally he became a president. As always the press crowd around.
-Mr. President, you know Europe very well, you lived there for a long time. Is there going to be any difference between your democracy and western democracy?
-You, journalists, always crave for sensations. No way! The difference will be very insignificant, let’s say, like between two chairs. A regular chair and an electric chair.

Due to the juxtaposition of the two chairs, the said “insignificant” difference turns out to be abysmal, this hyperbole exposing Putin’s claim to democracy as invalid. Incongruity in anekdot is often created through hyperbolization/exaggeration, as for instance in (2): Putin personally intimidating the lawmakers with a gun is definitely a hyperbolic metaphor for the use of “administrative resource” as an instrument of pressure. Hyperbolization is also specifically commented upon below in anekdots 6, 11, and 16.

Resolution of incongruity (i.e. putting the objects in question into the real relation, revealing the natural order of things) serves as a background against which the audience of political humor can perceive the situation presented in a joke as improbable, absurd, grotesque, and surreal.

The mental picture of the world of politics that exists in the mind of a common citizen comprises the following elements: political actors (leaders), their actions and the consequences of these actions. It stands to reason that the major characters of political anekdots are state leaders. None of soviet and post-soviet leaders avoided getting into anekdot. Persona No.1 is doomed to become the hero of anekdot: this person is known to
everybody, is interesting for everybody, and it’s quite risky to fight against them by means other than creating comic narratives.

Both the politicians and their actions are presented in the anekdot in a simplified and stereotyped way. The simplification consists in reducing the complexity of real-life politics to a limited number of otherwise multitudinous features and components — those which stand out highlighted in people’s consciousness.

The major function of anekdot as a genre is to parody the official culture in all its facets (Belousov, 1996). V. Khimik (2002) argues that anecdotal characters are not so much “Lenin, Stalin or Brezhnev as historical personages” but their “anti-cultural parodies” (Khimik, 2002). I believe this is true to the degree that a parody is “any humorous, satirical, or burlesque imitation, as of a person, event, etc.” (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/parody). Imitation implies similarity with the object of parody, so it is inevitably related to real life characters. Yes, these parodies are anti-cultural because what is ridiculed in connection with political leaders is their violation of social norms.

Let’s look at an anekdot (4) dealing with one of Putin’s administrative reforms - merging two neighboring regions into one.

(4) Putin is reasoning:
To incorporate Yamal into Krasnoyarsk region is a good idea, to incorporate Altai into Kemerovo region — not a bad idea... But why has it never occurred to anybody to incorporate Japan in the Kuril Islands?

Anekdot (4) exposes Russia’s claims of superpower on the international arena and also offers a paradoxical “solution” to the sensitive issue of Kuril Islands dispute (Dispute between Japan and Russia over sovereignty over the southernmost Kuril Islands. The disputed islands, which were occupied by Soviet forces at the end of World War II, are currently under Russian administration but are claimed by Japan, which refers to them as the Northern Territories).

The parody here consists in the fact that it takes the existing political realities (Russian territorial mergers, Japan’s official claims to part of the Kurils) and presents them in a “reverse perspective” - incorporating Japan as part of Russia, which is a totally crazy idea in view of modern political situation.

Thus, we can conclude that the parodied realities of political life are copies/imitations presented in a mockingly exaggerated way and the parody functions as an anti-cultural provocation, a kind of jocular challenge to the existing norms of international politics.

Another good example of a clear parody is anekdot (5) dealing with issues of freedom of speech under totalitarian regime. A totalitarian ruler does not expect any difference of opinion among his administration. Nobody dares object to him and, as shown in (5) parody
of sham discussion, even the high officials responsible for the huge army of a huge country do not have any opinion whatsoever; all they are capable of doing is parroting the boss.

(5) Putin and all the chief military officers got together to discuss the present state of affairs in the army.
- Why is our army so shitty? — wondered Putin.
- Shitty indeed. — defined Sergey.
- Shitty, whatever you may say. — echoed Kvashnin.
- Shitty, no doubt. — summed up Ivanov.

The media reported in the news that consensus was reached in assessing the condition of the army.

This anekdot is a parody because it presents something that looks like a real discussion, all participants seem to have a chance and are willing to give their voice. The sarcasm of the parody is generated by violating conversational norms: you are normally expected to answer a question and agree or disagree with a statement of opinion. Here however Putin asks a why-question to which his interlocutors readily respond with expression of agreement.

E.Shmeleva and A. Shmelev (2005) point out that modern urban anekdot is characterized by a limited and permanent set of characters with permanent speech and behavioral features, well known to all members of Russian linguo-cultural community and thus not needing to be introduced. Besides “speech masks,” what makes them instantaneously recognizable is also stereotyped details of their appearance or references to commonly known facts and events associated with these personages.

Here is, offered by O. Andreyeva and G. Tarasevich (2008), a brief summary of Russian major political leaders’ anecdotal images. Lenin is pictured as a burring dwarf with a habit of sticking his hand under his vest. Stalin in pre-war anekdots is a monster, a hopelessly negative personage; a post-war anecdotal Stalin equals Peter the Great as he remains in people’s memory: strict but fair. Khrushchev appears in anekdots as a simple-minded dreamer, Brezhnev as an aged moron, Gorbachev as a naïve and pathetic fool, Yeltsin — a nice person, a drunkard with manners of a provincial landlord.

Gorbachev was ridiculed for his anti-alcohol campaign and Yeltsin for his drunken behavior and slurred speech. Putin however poses a problem for anekdot-makers: he is always composed, always on the alert, well-dressed, keeps himself under control, drinks in moderation and speaks clearly.

As Lynn Berry (2006) remarks, “Perhaps most revealing about Putin as a leader is his own crude sense of humor and the tough-talking street language he uses. He recently told his ministers that no economic changes could be expected until they ‘stopped chewing on snot’ — slang for getting down to work.”
According to R. Trachtenberg, “Yeltsin anekdots were good-humored and funny, whereas Putin anekdots have a different tonality: pungent and sarcastic” (as cited in Andreyeva & Tarasevich, 2008). I believe that this difference in tonality brings out the difference in popular attitude: Yeltsin was not at all feared, whereas Putin is.

This is not accidental: one of the most prominent features of Putin as a leader is his association with KGB — a monster of cruelty and brutality in Russian historical memory.

(6) Putin gets up in the middle of the night and goes to the refrigerator. When he opens the door, a dish of jellied meat begins to tremble.

“Don’t worry, I’ve only come for a beer.”

This anekdot is a perfect illustration of hyperbolization — one of the principles inherent in the cognitive mechanism of comic transformation of reality. The concept of fear is subject to grotesque exaggeration mounting to absurdity — a lifeless object is trembling with fear thinking that Putin is going to eat it. The absurdity of the situation is based on the fact that this lifeless object happens to be a food item, something meant to be eaten, and moreover it happens to be jellied meat, one of the favorites of Russian national cuisine. We can vividly visualize a piece of jelly that can easily be shaken with the slightest movement of the plate — here however the jelly starts trembling on a motionless plate.

Putin jokes tend to play on the Kremlin’s consolidation of power, on the efforts to eliminate the opposition, on the silencing of independent voices and the domination over the other branches of government.

(7) Putin goes to a restaurant with the leaders of the two houses of parliament. The waiter approaches and asks Putin what he would like to order.

“I’ll have the meat.”

“And what about the vegetables?”

“They’ll have the meat, too.”

Putin is known for his adherence to the politics of force, strong reliance on the military, a coercive approach towards solving political problems. He is often paralleled to Stalin as having “a strong hand.” In (8) he appears to favor massive execution of government officials as an ultimate solution.

(8) Stalin appears to Putin in a dream, and asks: “Can I do anything to help you?”

Putin says: “Why everything here is so bad - the economy is falling to pieces, and so on. What am I to do?”

Stalin, without pausing for thought, answers: “Execute the entire government, and paint the walls of the Kremlin blue.”

“Why blue?” Putin asks.
“Hah! I knew you’d only ask about the second part!”

According to media reports, officers from Putin’s administration mention that he likes such jokes about himself; he likes to be presented as a tough guy.

The following joke (9) also deals, even though indirectly, with his preference for force methods in politics.

(9) Russian President Vladimir Putin is roasting Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko on a spit, working up a sweat as he rotates the spit as fast as he can.

Here comes President of Belarus and asks, ”Why are you turning him so quickly? He won’t be roasted thoroughly.”

“I have to, otherwise Yushchenko will steal the coals.’’

The joke refers to a well-known allegation that the Ukraine steals Russian gas from pipelines going through Ukrainian territory. The scene pictured in this humorous narrative visualizes “roasting” as a metaphor of severe criticism. Paradoxically the metaphor is annulled by returning to the literal meaning of “roasting” and thus allows unmasking a scandalous political situation.

The popular belief in a “strong hand” has always been inherent in Russian political mentality. Russians like leaders who project the image of power — this is one of the secrets of Putin’s popularity.


The essence of humor here lies in the grotesque exaggeration of personal power unlikely in any human being. Putin is likened to God in his ability to perform miracles, as in this allusion to the myth of creation: When Putin was little, he broke a cup. The spilled water turned into oceans and the splinters became continents.

He possesses supernatural physical abilities: Putin can scratch his own heel without bending over. By squinting his eye Putin can read and write multimedia DVDs. Putin’s stare penetrates a ten-foot lead wall and brings a kettle to a boil within 10 seconds from three miles away; for public safety he must wear special contact lenses at all times.

He is attributed boundless influence on the lives of his “subjects”: When Putin smiles, a child is born in Russia. If the smile is wider than usual, expect twins. When Putin is sad, the national suicide statistics go up.

He possesses infinite knowledge allowing him total control of the nation: Putin knows every Russian citizen’s name, address, and phone number. If you say a dirty word, Putin will call you in the evening to reprimand.
He possesses extraordinary capacity for military operation — he is practically invincible: *Shirts worn by Putin are sent to a secret military facility and converted to the strongest layer of armor for the Russian tanks. Chechen rebels blow themselves up when they hear Putin’s true name. Putin’s stare has downed 15 American satellites spying over the Kremlin.*

And, to crown it all, his very existence is essential to the well-being of mankind: *Saying Putin’s name repeatedly contributes to the common good in the universe. Putin inhales carbon dioxide and exhales oxygen, ensuring the continuation of life on the planet.*

Being a celestial creature he inspires awe, even more so because he belongs to the untouchables. Even mosquitoes do dare not bite him:

(10) *Putin and Bush are fishing on the Volga River. After half an hour Bush complains, “Vladimir, I’m getting bitten like crazy by mosquitoes, but I haven’t seen a single one bothering you.” Putin: “They know better than that.”*

The “untouchable Putin” joke is an allusion to the subconscious fear of the secret service (KGB) embedded in the genetic memory of generations of Russian people.

(11) - *Hi! We are calling from St. Petersburg.*
- *Why on earth should you start with threats?*

It is common knowledge that a lot of new officers whom Putin, native of St. Petersburg, recruited for his team, come from this city. So in (11), according to the law of anecdotal exaggeration, the very mentioning of St. Petersburg is enough for people to make far-reaching deductions and be on the alert.

In Soviet times it was not unheard of for people to be arrested for spreading anecdotes construed as anti-Soviet. A whiff of that era is discernible in jokes about Putin: more implicit in (13) and almost direct in (12).

(12) *Two men are talking.*
- *Do you know who in our country is the best lover of political anecdotes?*
- *No idea.*
- *Putin.*
- *You are kidding!*
*Not in the least. He collects anecdotes together with their storytellers.*

(13) *Our life five years from now:*
*Don’t think.*
*If you think something, don’t say it.*
*If you think it and say it, don’t write it.*
If you think it, say it and write it, don’t sign it.
If you think it, say it and sign it, don’t be surprised.”

KGB, and presumably its heir, has exercised total control of the citizens’ lives. As shown in (14), there’s no escape from the vigilant watch of secret service.

(14) Putin is on hotline.
An interesting question has just arrived: Don’t you think it is mean to answer anonymous questions online?
No, I don’t think it is mean, that’s my answer to the person who asked this question — Sergey Ivanov, residential address 13 Ivanovsky St., IP (such and such), provider (such and such), host (such and such).

Quite a few anecdotes express popular concern that Putin may manipulate his “administrative resource” to provide the outcome of election campaign.

(15) Hello Mom, congratulate me — I’ve won the elections!
(Mother, happily): Wow! Honestly?
You are the last person I would expect to hear such tart remarks from!

Incongruity in (15) is created by the pun on the word honestly: in mother’s reply it is used as an expression of surprise whereas Putin interprets it in its direct sense “not fraudulent.”

(16) Putin, Yavlinsky (liberal) and Zyuganov (communist) are on a plane. Suddenly the engine fails and the aircraft starts falling down. It turns out there’s only one parachute. Yavlinsky suggests having a secret vote so that the winner gets the parachute. So they do, and Putin happens to be the winner. He takes the parachute, bids farewell and jumps out.
Yavlinsky: Well, democracy is democracy.
Zyuganov: Sure, but I still can’t figure out how he has managed to outrun us by 1800 votes?

The object of satire in (16) is “staged” democracy. We observe the device of hyperbolization concerning an absolutely improbable detail of an otherwise quite probable situation. Providing the voting statistics in the absence of voters makes the situation absolutely surreal.

In the world of anecdotal politics government resources for arranging the results of election are so great that they can guarantee Putin winning presidential elections in the USA:
In view of the emerged uncertainty during the ballot count at the presidential election the US government asked the Central Election Committee of Russian Federation for technical assistance. Head of the Election Committee flew to the USA and as of today new data has been received: Vladimir Putin is in the lead.

Another cause for long-standing anxiety is the possibility of Putin staying for the third presidential term: prior to the election there were numerous suggestions from government officials of changing the Constitution to make this legal. The Western community was worried about the possibility of violating or changing the Constitution for the sake of his political ambition.

President Putin came up with an initiative: “I believe that the head of the state should be elected by the head of the state on the recommendation of the head of the state.”

In (18), Putin’s reasoning creates a vicious circle annihilating both the letter and the spirit of the fundamental law — the word “election” turns into a political phantom. The same perverse logic is characteristic of toadyish presidential lackeys in (19), manipulating the information to the advantage of their master:

Putin announced at a press conference that in 2008 the country would be ruled by a different man. Putin’s aide added that according to the undivided opinion of the West during the eight years of his presidency Putin has become a different man.

One of the steps Putin took in consolidating presidential power was to abolish public election of governors — now governors are appointed by the president — and this act rather puzzled the public. When people don’t understand the motivation, when they don’t know what stands behind certain political decisions they seek to find their own explanations which oftentimes are quite commonplace, as in anekdot (20) which plays upon a long-standing belief that the ruler knows better what is good for the people.

Why does Putin believe that it’s better to appoint rather than elect governors? Because he knows from his own experience that if you trust the people with elections, they are sure to elect some kind of shit.

Analysts observe gradual return to totalitarian power under Putin (Hari, 2006; Dimbleby, 2008; Stephens, 2009). Totalitarian power manifests itself in total conformity of citizens and officials; a dissident is a rare bird. Directions from the leader acquire the power of law; moreover, obsequious “servants” in their diligence surpass all thinkable expectations:
Another manifestation of totalitarian power is the fact that the government doesn’t care a bit about the ordinary people, the hardships they face in everyday life. Thus anekdot (22) causes a bitter smile if any:

(22) Putin’s Internet press conference.
The host: we’ve got two million questions: when are you going to raise the salaries?
Putin: I think it’s all spam.

We see that Putin, as well as his predecessors, is quite skillful in avoiding real answers to uncomfortable questions.

The culmination of a whole bulk of anekdots ridiculing the unquestionable recognition of Putin’s superpower and unlimited authority is reached in (23):

(23) To celebrate Putin’s birthday all Russian Internet resources from now on will have ."pu" instead of ."ru" in their addresses.

As we could observe in the above cited anekdots many of them actually mock at the inclination of Russians to invest their leaders with sublime status. Consequently, the anonymous authors of anekdots aim at desacralizing the top political actors. Desacralization in political humor is in keeping with the principle of incongruity and also serves as a manifestation of carnivalesque.

The concept of carnivalesque/carnivalization is attributed to M. Bakhtin (1965) who viewed carnival as an act of rebellion against authority and emphasised the subversive and anti-authoritarian aspects of carnival. “Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, manifest in his discussions of Rabelais and “forbidden laughter” in medieval folk culture, argued that folk celebrations which allowed for rowdy humor and the parody of authority offered the oppressed lower classes relief from the rigidity of the feudal system and the church and an opportunity for expressing nonconformist, even rebellious views” (Aschkenasy).

The two worlds — those of real politics and politics parodied in anekdot — are bridged together through the process of carnivalization — comic transfiguration of concepts based on value inversion. According to M. Bakhtin (1965), carnivalization consists in overturning of hierarchies — mingling of the sacred with the profane, the sublime with the
ridiculous. “The carnivalesque principle abolishes hierarchies, levels social classes, and creates another life free from conventional rules and restrictions” (Stam, 1989, p. 86).

Let us now observe how anecdotes deprive the “celestials” of their hallowed status.

(24) Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev wake up in the Kremlin in 2023 with a vicious hangover.

Putin says to Medvedev: “Which of us is president and which of us is prime minister today?”

“I don’t remember,” Medvedev replies. “I could be prime minister today...” Then go fetch some beer, “Putin says.

In (24) Putin and his protégé Medvedev, “the puppet president,” are shown as degraded alcoholics who do not remember which is which and argue whose turn it is to fetch some beer in order to cure the hangover. This is usually the job of a lower status person within the group hierarchy: since Putin appears to be the boss it is Medvedev’s turn to go get the beer.

Another point is that Medvedev does not exercise any real power and serves as a cover for Putin’s ambitions. This “tandem” allows Putin to stay in power even after the expiration of his constitutional term and at the same time to remain within lawful bounds.

According to the anecdot, they take turns swapping their offices well into 2023 and will probably do so indefinitely long beyond that. And it actually doesn’t matter who officially is president, and who is prime minister, which looks like a parody on executive power.

As a result of desacralization in anecdotal political reality we deal with high-ranking politicians who cannot be taken seriously and with democracy that is nothing but a phantom.

(25) Putin gets a call from the Coca-Cola headquarters:

- Excuse us, is it possible for Russia to get back its all-red flag and add a small print inscription “Always Coca-Cola”?

- Hmm... I need to consult my Cabinet.

He hangs up and calls the prime-minister:

- Hi, do you remember when our contract with “Aquafresh” expires?

Anekdot (25) exposes the cynicism of the government extending to the degree that they are ready to sell the state flag for their own benefit.

Desacralization of the sacred state symbols dear to the heart of every patriotic citizen is based on accidental coincidence of colors: the Soviet flag matches Coca-Cola red, while the Russian tricolor turns out to be nothing but the advertisement of Aquafresh toothpaste striped logo. People who are supposed to guard the interests of the state are downgraded to ordinary businessmen making profitable contracts.
Anekdots about Putin sum up the major sore points comprehended by the intellectual part of modern Russian society in connection with supreme power: abolishment of major democratic institutions (free press, free elections, party spectrum / political opposition, checks and balances by branches of power); total control of people’s lives, control of information, power abuse, lack of moral integrity, hypocrisy and double-facedness, inefficiency in solving the problems of the nation; ignoring people’s interests, lack of trust in the government, lack of «human face», fear of repressions, conformism and expressed unanimity with supreme power, etc.

The «sore points» of anekdot are related to the expression of values in political discourse. Values serve as foundation for social norms guiding and controlling human activity; they underlie the course of communication, they determine its contents (topics discussed) and strategies/tactics chosen by the speaker to realize his/her intentions.

With respect to values comic genres of political discourse (caricature, parody, joke, anekdot etc.) as opposed to serious genres (campaign ads, parliamentary debate, presidential address etc.) can be placed on a specific value scale, a semiotic axis with two poles — “the sacred” and “the profane.”

It’s important to remark that the terms “the sacred” and “the profane” are used here not in their direct meaning pertaining to the distinction between the religious and secular worlds, as pointed out by R. Caillois (2001) and M. Eliade (1961). They are used to refer metaphorically to “high” values (objects and qualities that society holds in great esteem and admiration, accepts as ideal norms to be quided by) and “low” values or anti-values (objects and qualities that present danger or threat to the well-being of society, are considered as unworthy, opposed to the ideal and desirable).

Unlike, for instance, the inaugural address, which asserts the “sacred” high values of worthy leadership directly and explicitly, values in anekdot are asserted implicitly through ridiculing their antipodes — negative values or, in other words, deviations from the norm. Political humor thus serves as a discourse instrument of checks and balances meant to protect the society from power abuse and violation of social norms.

The sacred (the image of ideal leadership worthy of respect and admiration) is transformed into the profane through criticism, exposure and ridicule. By means of humor people criticize what they don’t like about politicians acting on the present-day stage. The comic accent on the negative values and images implicitly serves to assert positive values associated with ideal leadership.

To sum it up, we can conclude that political jokes contain a collective portrait of an unworthy leader — the exact opposite of the image created in the inaugural address — and consists in the profanation of values connected with the idea of a worthy leader. It is believed, however, that profanation of the sacred serves to confirm its significance for society.
While analyzing political anecdotes we could observe the following cognitive mechanisms, which provide transformation of reality resulting in the comic/satirical picture of the world of politics.

1. The complex and multifaceted reality is reduced to a limited number of selected and highlighted elements (some people, some of their characteristics, some of their actions);
2. These selected elements are brought to a focus;
3. The negative aspects of these elements are hyperbolized;
4. The underlying negative concepts are subject to carnivalization.
5. Incongruity principle (putting together incompatible frames of reference) is employed to provide for humorous effect.

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NARRATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND STEREOTYPES: DISCURSIVE FUNCTIONS OF RUSSIAN ANEKDOTS

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Much recent linguistic work is devoted to different aspects of verbal humor and various speech genres constituting this category. The present paper focuses on anekdots — a specific speech genre which is an important part of contemporary Russian jokelore. By its most obvious function — entertaining and eliciting laughter — anekdot is a component of a large body of texts classified as verbal humor. The structural properties of anekdot make it possible to define it as a culture-specific speech genre with conventionalized text structure and mode of presentation. However, discursive functions of this type of jokes allow us to place them in a wider category of narrative. The article shows how the narrative structure of anekdots reflects their socio-semiotic functions in various discursive communities. Anekdots translate behavioral stereotypes about different social groups, and, as such, can carry a wide range of social meanings. In-group anekdot-telling is aimed at dissociation from existing stereotypes and maintaining group values while out-group performance of anekdots is aimed at enhancing self-esteem. The understandability of a joke depends largely on the social salience of the target group and existing stereotypes about that group. Anekdots may become part of larger narratives and in this case they function as a way of talking about everyday experience. When a real situation is compared to an anekdot, the speaker aims at maintaining her/his negative experience in a humorous way.

Keywords: speech genre, verbal humor, narrative, discursive community, Russian jokelore, stereotypes

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In the Preface to “The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes” John Gross notes: “The urge to exchange anecdotes is as deeply implanted in human beings as the urge to gossip” (2006, p. vii). Though Gross is talking about a specific genre of literary anecdotes that exists in English-speaking cultures, his idea can be successfully applied to Russian genre of anekdots — short jokes on ethnic, political or everyday life topics.

The origin of Russian ‘anekdot’ lies in Western tradition of telling literary anecdotes, but at the present moment the two genres differ in many respects (Khimik, 2002). The Oxford Dictionary of English defines an anecdote as “a short amusing or interesting story about a real incident or person.” Russian dictionaries define ‘anekdot’ as a short entertaining story aimed at making fun of someone or something. The dictionary definitions give the reader an idea of similarity between the two genres, but both entries miss the range of social meanings that anecdotes in the Western cultural tradition and ‘anekdots’ in Russian discourse convey.

Explaining verbal humor is always a challenge. Nevertheless, in the past decades ‘anekdot’ as a popular conversational genre has received quite a lot of attention from comedians and publishers. Numerous printed collections of jokes and Internet sites devoted to ‘anekdots’ (e.g. http://www.anekdot.ru) prove everlasting popularity of the genre in everyday discourse.

There has been a surge of interest in genre properties of Russian ‘anekdots’. Russian language scholars and philosophers have treated this type of jokes from both linguistic and cultural perspectives (Karasik, 1997; Golev, 2000; Kagan, 2002; Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002; Sedov, 2007; Dementiev, 2008). There are also attempts to introduce Russian ethnic ‘anekdots’ to an English-speaking audience (Draitser, 1998).

Because of its obviously entertaining orientation the genre of ‘anekdot’ is viewed as a way of using language to create humorous effect. Along with other speech genres aimed at eliciting laughter ‘anekdots’ constitute a large part of Russian verbal humor.

Humor is a social phenomenon which is created through communication. Having a sense of humor is so important, that most people tend to believe their ability to understand humor is above average. This overrated level of self-esteem is a result of a high value society places on humor (Gregory, 2004). Not surprisingly, general theories of humor have a long history in philosophy and literary studies. The past decades faced the development of new theories in the field of verbal humor from both formal and functional perspectives (Attardo, 1994; Ritchie, 2003; Martin, 2007). From the linguist’s point of view, the ability to understand and create humor using language is one of the basic features of human language behavior (Alexander, 1997).

Verbal humor allows people to express their feelings and emotions in a socially acceptable way. In the Soviet Union telling ‘anekdots’ was a form of implicit expression of anger and discontent, and the gibes aimed at political leaders served as an antidote to official
propaganda. Anekdot-telling was a specific kind of social activity considered at some points of time as being able to affect lives of both the teller and the audience. Funnily enough, this fact became the object of joking, too:

_The Soviet government announced an ‘anekdot’ competition. First prize — 10-year sentence, second prize — 5 years in prison._

Scholars of verbal humor observe that the rules of using language for the purpose of entertainment are different from the rules which govern information exchange (Crystal, 1998). Humorous effect is a result of interaction between language units and context. That is why a large body of research on verbal humor concentrates on enumerating different language tools and techniques that are used to create humor (Chiaro, 1992; Sannikov, 2002). An alternative approach to humor takes into account the social settings and constraints and analyzes humorous use of language from a socio-semiotic perspective. For instance, Alexander (1997) creates a hierarchy of perspectives and places verbal humor into a particular context or situation, which, in its turn, becomes a constituent of a larger socio-semiotic system.

Though humor and its functions are universal, “the greatest difference among cultures should be found in the contents and situations of humor” (Ziv, 1988, p. xi). The fact that jokes are difficult to translate into other languages and cultures is a truism (Simpson, 2003). The sources of humor in Russian ‘anekdots’ are varied in terms of their formal and semantic properties. ‘Anekdots’ in which the humorous effect is a result of lexical polysemy show semantic constraints of the Russian language and are the most difficult (and sometimes impossible) to translate. Any attempt to substitute an ambiguous word with synonyms dismantles all the humor. Often the desired effect is created in the interface between linguistic and pragmatic levels and this poses yet another problem for the translation of ‘anekdots’.

In attempts to describe the relations between verbal humor and mental activities in which it occurs, the researchers define cognitive structures that underlie verbally expressed humor in various terms. One of the most popular theories of verbal humor — the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) developed by Raskin and Attardo — claims that the structure of a joke is a script that models our knowledge about some situation or activity (Attardo, 2001).

The approach to humorous text suggested by Norrick defines underlying structures as frames coding generalized ideas about the process of communication. Typical contexts of interaction presented in jokes “frame concepts account for expectations about story patterns themselves as well as for relations between the elements of a narrative... Frames encode prototypes for objects, sequences of events, and causal relationships, which facilitate recognition, categorization and memory of stories; in addition, they guide tellers in what sorts of stories are appropriate and what to include in them as well as suggesting hearers what to expect and how to respond to stories” (Norrick, 2000, p. 8).
The discussion of cognitive basis for anekdot-telling is above the scope of the paper. For the present discussion of Russian ‘anekdots’ the most important point is that the cognitive structure inherent in ‘anekdot’ reflects the generalized experience of the members of the Russian speech community.

Cognitive analysis of verbal humor stands separately from the strong tradition to view Russian anekdotes as a unique speech genre with its own structure and rich cultural and historical implications (Khimik, 2002; Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002; Sedov, 2007). The notion of speech genre as defined by Bakhtin (2000) is a convenient tool for capturing formal properties of speech-in-context.

Following Bakhtin’s (2000) ideas, Wierzbicka (2001) observes that it is possible to compare cultures in terms of speech genres: each culture has its specific set of genres recognized and used as patterns in communication. According to Wierzbicka (2001), each speech genre is a culture-specific form of talk. As Simpson points out, “… genre is a form of language that is used to accomplish culturally-determined goals…” (Simpson, 2003, p.74).

Formal properties of ‘anekdots’ are well-documented by Russian scholars. Retellability, theatrical manner of telling (performance) and specific text structure — these three features are genre-constituent for Russian ‘anekdots’ (Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002). The first feature concerns the properties of context for anekdot-telling. ‘Anekdots’ as a part of Russian jokelore can be recited by various speakers to different audiences and in this sense they are re-tellable. Anekdots can be easily detached from the context of use and they can be reproduced on different occasions. In Russian communication, learning to tell anekdots through their repetition to different listeners is part of children’s socialization.

The second feature refers to the speaker’s manner of narration. The successful joke-telling requires theatrical manner of delivery. Following the polyphonic nature of ‘anekdots’ the speaker has to act out the story and present “typical” discursive features involved in the joke. This results in the imitation of accents in ethnic jokes or ‘anekdots’ about political leaders with a distinctive manner of speaking. Successful performance is also needed to secure the listeners’ attention.

The third feature describes formal properties of an ‘anekdot’. Textual structure of a joke has a fixed pattern: it includes some pivotal phrasing in the introductory part of the story and the exact reproduction of a final punch line. This kind of textual pattern serves as a framing device for both the speaker and the listeners and most of the times remains unchanged (with exception of the situations where anekdots are only mentioned, not told). Theorists of folk genres observe that the formulaic kind of structure is typical of the oral speech genres in general. Structural clarity is very important for both production and comprehension of an ‘anekdot’, though some minor changes in the plot or the list of characters are possible.
The features described above constitute the dimensions of the ‘anekdot’ as a speech genre in Russian everyday discourse.

Being an oral kind of jokes, ‘anekdots’ combine features of both conversational and literary styles. This characteristic allowed Sedov (2007) to place ‘anekdots’ between everyday colloquial speech and literary texts on a continuum of speech genres.

Defining the genre properties of ‘anekdot’ is helpful for placing this type of jokes in a large and heterogeneous system of Russian jokelore. Genre description, however, is not sufficient for explaining why people engage in telling ‘anekdots’ in everyday communication.

Some researchers claim that the only purpose of anekdot-telling is entertainment (e.g. Sedov, 2007). Attempts to limit the discursive functions of ‘anekdots’ are grounded in the claim that ‘anekdot’ is a form of deliberate humor where the teller intends to be funny. However, entertainment and amusement are only the surface goals of using ‘anekdots’ in discourse. At the deeper level the pragmatics of “being funny” also involves status negotiation, social identification and other socio-semiotic aspects of interaction.

In the following section of the paper we will look at the properties of ‘anekdots’ as a specific kind of linguistic behavior that enables the speaker to convey a wide range of social meanings.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF RUSSIAN ‘ANEKDOTS’

The genre approach to ‘anekdots’ characterizes their formal properties and allows their structural and thematic classification. However, to see the jokes “at work” one needs a different perspective. In our further discussion of Russian ‘anekdots’ we will proceed from the assumption that in everyday communication they serve multiple functions: for one thing, they are used as narratives which shape our ordinary experience. ‘Anekdots’ are told to translate stereotypes about different social groups as a part of this experience. Alternatively, narration of an ‘anekdot’ can be a way of managing the speaker’s unsuccessful experience.

Linguistic analysis of conversational narratives traditionally concentrates on explicit ways of story-telling. The structure of stories elicited by an interviewer is considered as a narrative prototype. In this sense ‘anekdots’ are not prototypical stories about past experiences: their polyphonic nature prevents them from narrative analysis.

Analyzing ‘anekdots’ in terms of their narrative structures and discursive functions requires a shift in the interpretation from local context-as-situation to a wider context-as-pattern of linguistic behavior.

Shiffrin and Drew (2006) define narrative as “a form of discourse through which we reconstruct and represent past experience both for ourselves and for others” (p. 321). So by rating anekdots as narratives we assume that people tell anekdots to share some sort of experience. As such, narratives can serve multiple functions. As Quasthoff (2005) points out,
Telling a story in a conversation can be considered as a prototypical form of human communication: in this activity language is used to

- transcend the mutually accessible here-and-now by referring to a past event,
- share emotions and attitudes with respect to this past event and its participants,
- display and negotiate the narrator’s / character’s concept of self,
- fulfill cognitive, communicative and interactive functions such as sense-making, informing, amusing, “unburdening,” positioning.

William Labov (1997) established a tradition to focus on the most prototypical kind of narrative — telling a story about a past event or extraordinary experience. The narratives are elicited during interviews where the narrator is prompted to speak about an unusual situation where his life was jeopardized.

Labov (1972) introduced a general structure for a fully-formed conversational narrative which resulted in narrowing the scope of narratives to a limited number of stories. However, today the researchers suggest this structure may serve as a prototype for many kinds of narratives which, depending on the situation, audience, and purpose of story-telling may not develop full structure (Robinson, 1981).

Modern studies on narrative have moved from structural approach to a wider functional understanding of using language for talking about past experience (e.g. Sheigal, 2007). Narrative is a mode of language behavior, as Michael Toolan and Paul Cobley (2001) point out.

Though “it gradually appeared that narratives are privileged forms of discourse which play a central role in almost every conversation” (Labov, 1997, p. 396), Russian ‘anekdots’ have not received much attention at the level of narratives. Yet, analysis of everyday Russian discourse shows that anecdote-telling constitutes an essential part of story-telling or talking about experience in everyday communication. Consider the following fragment of an interview with a stage director Mark Zakharov where he is prompted to talk about the relationships between actors and directors in a theatre. The ‘anekdot’ he tells illustrates the main point of his talk:

*Kak ego ni liubi, kak ne lelej, artist vse ravno, inoj raz podsoznat’no, podozrevat rezhissera v skrytoj zlovednosti. Rezhisser tozhe podozrevat svoego lubimtsa ne v samykh dobrykh namerenijakh. Potom, konechno, mozhet nastupat’ obshchee otrezyvlenie i chetkoe ponimanie, chto my uzhe drug bez druga ne mozhem, chto, nesmotria na travmirovannuju nervnuju sistemku aktera i takuju zhe izdernannuju psikhiku rezhissera, my iskrenne liubim drug druga. Primerno kak v tom anekdote pro zhenu: “Ty nie khotel s nej razvestis’?” — “Razvestis’ — niet. Ubit’ — da.”*
No matter how the director loves and cherishes an actor, he, sometimes subconsciously, suspects the director of hidden malignance, anyway. The director also suspects his favorite of having intentions that are far from being kind. Then, of course, everybody comes to understanding that we cannot live without each other and, despite the actor’s injured nervous system and shattered nerves of the director, we sincerely love each other. Just like in that joke about a wife: “Did you want to divorce her?” — “To divorce — no. To kill — yes.”

Metaphorical comparison of actor — director relationships in a theater to an anecdotal family quarrel which ended up in a murder illustrates generalized experience of the teller in a compact and entertaining mode and gives the impression of high emotional involvement of the teller.

Despite their small size, Russian ‘anekdots’ demonstrate all major features of a narrative. They are introduced into conversation with set phrases. It has been observed that formulaic introductions are typical of conversational narratives and of folklore genres (Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002). ‘Guess what?’ is a good start phrase for telling news in everyday conversation, and the words ‘Once upon a time’ introduce fairytales to the speakers of English. In Russian discourse ‘anekdot’ is most often introduced with the phrase “Eto kak v tom anekdote...” (“It is like in that joke...”). Introduction marks important points in conversation: it helps the speaker to gain the floor and hold attention of the audience. The teller introduces his/her ‘anekdot’ to secure attention and interest of the listener. Because set phrases are used to introduce or mention a joke, they serve as verbal cues which shape expectations of the listeners and help to predict the humorous course of a narration, follow its turns, and anticipate the incompatibility on which the joke will be based. Finally, introductory remarks shape listeners’ expectations and signal what kind of reaction is expected.

The first phrase/phrases of an ‘anekdot’ play the role of what Labov called Orientation: they define the scene and participants of the story. This is usually done in one or two casual utterances: ‘The husband comes home from a business trip’ / ‘The teacher asks the class a question’ etc.

‘Anekdots’ as narratives are very carefully designed — each sentence shapes the boundaries of events or ideas. At the same time each sentence is a clarification of the previous. Some ‘anekdots’ contain two or three phrases that have a distinctive verbal link.

In the following very short joke the sentences are connected with the help of partial recurrence, in terms of Beaugrande and Dressler (1981):

Vovochka khotel stat’ prezidentom... I stal.
Vovochka wanted to become a president... And so he did (became).
In Labov’s theory of narrative the most important part of story-telling is evaluation. In their stories about past experiences people explicitly express their attitude to the situation, its participants and the outcome. According to Labov (1997), it is evaluative component that distinguishes narratives from other types of story-telling.

Evaluation in ‘anekdots' is different from the prototypical narratives. In fact, there are two kinds of evaluation: internal (on the part of the story-teller) and external (on the part of the audience). Internal evaluation is not stated explicitly — the teller is not supposed to laugh at the joke, but the assessment of the story as funny is an essential part of presupposition. External evaluation is expressed by immediate laughter or smiles of the audience.

Narration or mentioning of an ‘anekdot’ is often a reaction to a current topic of the conversation. The speaker justifies the necessity to tell a joke at the beginning of a narrative (Abstract in Labov’s terminology). An example that illustrates the point is an excerpt from an Internet forum where people discuss questions of health:


Competence can be different. I think it is disgusting to give medical advice if you are not a doctor. L You know this joke? A patient says to a doctor: “Why does one need to study medicine for so many years? You can just read the Encyclopedia of Medicine and learn everything.” The doctor replies: “Then you are at a risk to die of a misprint.”

Pragmatically the joke serves as an illustration of the speaker’s point of view. The speaker adjusts the ‘anekdot’ to the situation with the question “Znaete anekdot?” (You know the joke?). It is also interesting how the speaker expresses her evaluation: she uses non-verbal sign (a smiley L) to express her negative emotions. The next step is telling an ‘anekdot’ which illustrates the point.

There are meta-communicative phrases with which speakers of Russian evaluate the relevance of an ‘anekdot’ to the topic: “k slovy” (“to the word”), “k mestu” (“to the place”). Telling an ‘anekdot’ that is not somehow connected to the situation creates an awkward feeling among the participants of communication.

‘Anekdots’ in naturally occurring discourse can become a conversationally embedded part of a bigger narrative. Activities performed in real life are compared to stereotyped situations of the jokes and thus they get implicit emotional evaluation. Implicit description of the teller’s experience is one of the major discursive functions of ‘anekdots’ in Russian culture. When the speaker compares her/his actions with an anecdotal situation, the story
reflects the speaker’s identity as well as marks her/his belonging to a particular discursive community.

Research on different types of verbal jokes (and that includes Russian ‘anekdots’) tends to assume that the only function of verbal humor is entertaining and eliciting laughter from the audience. However, anekdot-telling may pursue other pragmatic goals. As most narratives, ‘anekdots’ reflect shared presuppositions and values of different groups.

‘ANEKDOTS’ IN DISCURSIVE COMMUNITIES

Large body of our everyday experience concerns dealing with members of different social groups. Successful communication within heterogeneous society is possible when people have guidelines that direct their expectations. Psychologists suggest that these guidelines exist as stereotypes and function as normative beliefs which help people coordinate their behavior and as such are inevitable whether they are ‘true’ or ‘not true’ (McGarty, Yzerbyt & Spears, 2002).

Stereotyped representation of boundaries (or sometimes war frontiers) between nations, countries, languages, professions, or social groups of different kind is reflected in a variety of ‘anekdots’. Collections of ‘anekdots’ published in books or in the net are often subdivided into parts (or chapters) “About Jews,” “About Chuckchees,” “About Ukranians,” etc. The ethnonyms used in such ‘anekdots’ are very often not neutral, but derogatory or, at least, funny: zhidy (Jews), khokhly (Ukrnians), fritsy (Germans, from a common name Fritz), or finiki (Finns, the word is equal to “dates, fruit of the date palm”). There is a new word for Americans, pindosy, with a yet unclear etymology that is now used a great deal more often than the traditional yanki (Yankees) (The usage appears to date back to the NATO ‘pacification’ in Kosovo when Russian and American soldiers communicated very closely (at the same time, the word had existed long before that, see http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki):

An American tourist (pindos) on a sightseeing tour in Moscow asks his guide:
Your buildings are so tiny! Back in America, we would have this kind of building ten times bigger than this one here.
No wonder. It is a lunatic asylum / mental health clinic (http://gorodok.spl.kz/forum/).

The negative connotation added by using the derogatory ethnic nomination serves the purpose of preserving the idea of one’s own, native “territory” as being friendly, comfortable and cognitively transparent, whereas the alien “territory” is hostile, strange and cognitively impenetrable. Languages of other nations are treated in such texts (as well as in other instances of ‘naive linguistics’) as difficult (Chinese, Japanese), poor (Chuckchee) or funny (Ukrainian, being also considered as ‘spoiled Russian’ — or, from the other side of the
“barricades” Russian is viewed as ‘spoiled Ukrainian’). These auto- and hetero-stereotypes (Lehtonen, 2005, p. 69) do reflect some relationship between nations and languages in the real world, but mainly are just fast and simplified answers to complicated situations (Lippman, 1922, p. 18), pivots for people rather to raise self-respect, than to serve as secure guidelines for primary everyday contact. Even ‘naïve anthropology’ admits sometimes that “not all pindosy are stupid” or “the most pindosy are Russians imitating pindosy.” At the same time, such collections of jokelore and mythology about nations as the series “Xenophobe’s Guide to...” (Russian version: “Eti strannyje...” “Those strange...”) are extremely popular, not to mention comedians’ contribution to spreading the stereotypes through TV or radio.

On the other hand, not only outsiders are treated in a negative manner, some critical aspect of viewing the members of the insider’s group can also be found in Russian ‘anekdots’ about Russians themselves. Such features as addiction to drinking, stealing or other ‘sins’ are regarded as ‘bad’, but with a great deal of kind humour. Many ‘anekdots’ feature Russian drunkards boasting about this ‘bad habit’: There are many anekdots about drinking competitions among different nationalities (an Englishman, a Frenchman or a Russian, or some other combination of three national representatives).

The true nature of nationalistic jokes can be clarified by comparing them across nations and across social groups. Many of them reproduce similar trivial plots, regardless of the key concept. Thus, there is a joke about a Chuckchhee (or a blonde in some versions) attempting to buy a TV set: the shop assistant refuses to sell it “because it is not a TV set, but a microwave.” Stereotyped stupidity is attributed to somebody who is alien to the insider and his social or ethnic group. ‘Anekdots’ in Russian discourse are narratives that help to form and convey such stereotypes. This is one more instance of proof that anekdots serve as cognitive schemata to help perceive and classify the world.

When talking about narratives it is necessary to distinguish between the properties of the story (or a type of story) and its performance. The properties of the story reflect prototypical structure of a particular genre while the actual performance shows how this prototype is used in a discursive event. Dementiev (2008, p. 196) goes as far as to suggest treating written and oral anekdots as different genres with distinctive syntactical features.

The performance of ‘anekdots’ can be analyzed as a socio-semiotic event within a particular discursive community. Hutcheon (2005) suggests the term ‘discursive community’ to take all kinds of social and language-in-use differences into account. She uses the term to cover “complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (p. 91).

Being a member of a discursive community means sharing experiences with other members, and that includes knowledge of preferred speech genres, communicative strategies and social implications carried by different discursive practices. Discursive communities also share types of narratives and general rules of their interpretation. Such knowledge constitutes
a large part of our everyday talk. All discursive communities develop structures that serve
the function of talking about everyday experience.

**TALKING ABOUT EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE**

Because ‘anekdots’ present typical situations of interaction or generalized experience
in terms of social roles, they can be used as a behavioral pattern in categorization of specific
situations. Personal experience is shaped in more general terms and at the same time
evaluated in a humorous mode. In the following excerpt from a LiveJournal record
(http://lestat-1985.livejournal.com/776.html) the author mentions a joke about car-service
in Russia. The reader will find the intertextual reference to the joke entertaining only if
she/he has experience of driving and servicing Russian cars. The humor is easily understood
by those who know that, unlike Russian cars, foreign cars are not supposed to be serviced
or repaired by the owner. Some people find it rather inconvenient because every time there
is a problem a car should be taken to a service center. Others find it very practical because
they prefer to address technical problems to service centers:

*Vot za chto ya liublu inomarki... Da za to, chto v nikh vsio pochti tak, kak v tom
anekote, — esli protiranie tryapochkoj nie pomoglo, znachi t, delo dejsvitel-no plokho.*

*This is why I like foreign cars... because they are just like in that joke: if wiping with a
cloth doesn’t help, then things are really in a bad way.*

‘Anekdots’ may be used as part of a larger narrative and as such they help to report on
ordinary events (what Labov later called “the banal narratives of every-day life”) in an
amusing and entertaining way.

*Za piat’ minut imeja iskhodnyj nomer as’ki moego muzha i Yandex, ja nashla info o tom,
kak ego zovut, datu rozhdenija, nomer mobil’nika (!), to, kakaya u nego mashina,
primenuju sferu dejatel’nosti. Situatsija kak v tom anekote — “i eti ludi zapreshchajut
mne kovyryat’ v nosu!” I eto moj muzh govoril mne, chto ya slishkom mnogo informacii
o sebe vyveshivayu.*

*Five minutes after acquiring my husband’s ICQ number and Yandex I found info about
his name, birth date, mobile phone number (!), what kind of car he has and the type of
work he does. The situation is like in that ‘anekdot’ — “And these people would not let
me pick my nose!” And it was my husband who kept telling me that I post too much
personal information.*
Pragmatics of mentioning a joke in the passage involves not only an element of entertainment but also a question of status negotiation. The punch line of the ‘anekdot’ cited by the speaker refers the readers to the following joke:

*Vovochka enters his parents’ bedroom and sees his father and mother making love. He thinks: “And these people would not let me pick my nose!”*

The punch line in the passage questions the right of the speaker’s husband to criticize her Internet activity while he himself made his private information publically available. By questioning the husband’s authority the author of the message negotiates her social position and creates ironic relations between herself and her husband. The teller distances herself from the victim of irony. The ironic intention of the speaker becomes obvious when actions of another person are compared to the generalized situation of an ‘anekdot’. Irony is signaled by the phrase “The situation is like in that anekdot!”

Self-irony in anekdot-telling is also widely used, similar to the situation of criticizing one’s own nation. If the speaker chooses to talk about her/his experience as similar to an ‘anekdot’, she/he ironically acknowledges inability to control her/his affairs. Self-irony is a strategy of intentional retreat which helps to manage failures and smooths the feeling of embarrassment. In such cases narration of ‘anekdotes’ functions as a face-saving technique. E.g., in an Internet blog (http://wwwboards.auto.ru/pharmacy/47648.html) a man narrates a story about visiting a private clinic. The personnel talked the narrator into doing several unnecessary but expensive tests to diagnose his illness. The title of the post is “Kak v tom anekdote pro volka, kotory chitat’ ne umel” (Like in that joke about a wolf which could not read). Mentioning an ‘anekdot’ helps the author to be self-ironic and present himself to the readers, as an insider, as being part of the same community.

**NARRATING STEREOTYPES**

Discursive communities unite people of different ethnic, class and other social macro- and microgroups. Being members of a large speech community, we belong to different overlapping discursive communities and this guarantees circulation of ‘anekdots’ and transmission of various behavioral stereotypes. Treating people as members of different social groups makes it possible to ignore diverse information about possible social and linguistic behavior which is associated with individuals.

Such stereotypes are results of the process of categorization. Talking about stereotypes in modern political discourse Krystyna Skarżyńska (2002) notes,

The process of categorization is one of the ways to cope with the complexity of the outside world. It consists in a simplified (but economic) way of processing information.
and creating a mental picture of another person. This picture is created with the help of an “implicit theory” or a stereotype that we have on the group the person belongs to. Such a perception of people by categorization (that is by including people into categories) lets the perceiver to automatically ascribe certain features to those perceived (p. 252).

‘Anekdot’ is the gist of “popular thinking” and it is always a parody of a behavioral stereotype. Because a parody is always an intertextual event, telling an ‘anekdot’ involves referring to existing knowledge of typical situations or texts that circulate within a discursive community. Understanding jokes requires background knowledge which is usually shared by members of a particular discursive community.

Modern Russian speech community is very heterogeneous: the diversity of ethnic, professional and other kind of social groups is reflected in Russian jokelore. The speech community includes various overlapping discursive communities which share narrative strategies of telling jokes but differ in terms of stereotype maintenance. Stereotypes focus on a particular characteristic and present it as typical while downplaying all other features of the category.

Pragmatically there is an important difference between the in-group anekdot-telling and translating stereotypes about other groups through ‘anekdots’.

Stereotyping within Target Group. Telling an ‘anekdot’ within the group in its pragmatic potential differs from the same joke being told by someone who does not belong to the group. Ethnic and occupational jokes are a good example. Telling them within a target group is often a way of defining and reinforcing group norms by communicating what is unacceptable. The in-group joke narration helps to maintain group values and integrity because the speaker dissociates her/himself from the stereotype reproduced in the ‘anekdot’. The behavioral stereotype becomes the object of shared irony.

The following joke may be told either by programmers or people of a different profession.

A programmer goes to bed. He puts two glasses on a bed-side table: one with water if wants to drink, and an empty one in case he does not.

The joke is a parody of the algorithms of the “if — not” type. If told by a programmer, the ‘anekdot’ ridicules the stereotype of someone who creates programs for computers and follows them in everyday life. Thus in-group joking usually establishes norms and values *ad absurdum*: norms are defined through their violation.

If the same joke is recited by a non-programmer, it conveys existing stereotype about a “typical programmer” who is highly influenced by professional duties and from an outsider’s point of view demonstrates habits and behavior of a boring person.
A lot of ‘anekdots’ appear within target group as a reaction to problems. For instance, jokes about economic crisis first appeared in informal business communication, but, because of salience of the topic spread among other discursive communities:

*According to RosBusinessConsulting News Agency, death penalty in Russia is replaced by real estate mortgages.*

*Telling jokes about others.* Discursive communities vary by the repertory of ‘anekdots’ associated with them. To tell an anekdot about a particular group (blondes, “new Russians,” the Ukrainians, etc.) means to show awareness of its selective features. Telling jokes about a “typical teacher,” a “typical Estonian,” or a doctor — patient interaction shows some degree of familiarity with the lifestyle and habits of a particular ethnic, occupational or other social group and at the same time reveals existing negative stereotypes about them. For instance, occupational gibes about teachers appeared and became popular relatively recently. Most of the jokes reflect the stereotype about a very low income and poor standards of living.

*Two women meet in the street. One of them says:*
*You must be a teacher!*
*How do you know?*
*By your appearance: you look shabby and old-fashioned.*
*Shabby and old-fashioned! Look at yourself!*
*I know. I’m a teacher, too.*

Usability of stereotypes in discourse relies on the fact that stereotyped roles are closely associated with typical actions and properties. All modern ‘anekdots’ about blondes, teachers, programmers and other social and professional groups are based on the stereotypes which reflect existing ideas about typical behavior or intellectual abilities of members of these groups. Such stereotyping results in a very stable framing of experience and resists any change.

Telling ‘anekdots’ about “others” is a way of social comparison which leads to enhancing one’s own self esteem which is drawn from both implicit group comparison and intellectual pleasure from inferencing and laughter. Jokes become a strategy of narration of power through entertainment and one of pragmatic results achieved by the anekdot-teller is self-aggrandizement.

Once established, ‘anekdots’ start circulating in different social groups: the more salient the stereotype is the more groups will adopt it. In this respect the group of ‘blondes’ is a special case because it is a social construct but not a group that exists in reality. No person in her right mind would acknowledge being a “typical blonde.” Anekdots about
blondes became popular with the advent of "glamour epoch." The gist of these jokes is a universal downplay of beautiful women with very low intellectual abilities.

Two blondes sit in a café and talk. One of them asks:
I can’t figure out which is the right pronunciation: Iran or Iraq?
People pronounce it both ways.

The blondes are an example of extreme unawareness about what happens in the world. Their stupidity serves as a background against which the speaker implicitly compares his/her competence:

Two blondes are chatting:
The spring is so nice... the days lengthen ...
Knock on wood!

(‘Knocking on wood’ is part of a widely spread superstition that speaking about positive changes might spoil or worsen the situation; the remedy is wood-knocking).

Telling jokes about other groups requires creating a dividing line between self and “others.” In naturally occurring conversations this is achieved through theatrical performance of an ‘anekdot’. In ethnic jokes performance includes imitation of an accent — this is the easiest way of portraying “others.” The idea that imitation of speech is only a part of performance which does not carry any semantic or pragmatic meaning introduced in (Shmeleva & Shmelev, 1999) seems to be an oversimplification: by adopting a different manner of speech the teller outlines disparities in discursive strategies used by “others” and implicitly compares his/her social and discursive identity with those of “others.”

CONCLUSION

Because jokes entertain, they make the speaker more noticeable even if the story is well-known to the listeners. In modern Russian discourse ‘anekdot’ functions as a narrative demonstrating its major properties in a compressed form. Since the narrative structure of ‘anekdots’ is highly conventionalized, they are used as stereotyped recipes to talk about people’s experience in an implicit and humorous way.

Talking about personal experience (both positive and negative) is an essential part of everyday communication. Jokes are among the most fundamental narrative structures in oral Russian discourse: they help to (re)construct and narrate events and situations and at the same time express speaker’s evaluation of them.

Russian ‘anekdots’ are an essential resource for organizing interpersonal communication. From the socio-semiotic perspective they reflect mass consciousness of the
majority. Telling jokes is a strategy used to establish asymmetrical relations between the speaker and the object of an ‘anekdot’.

Yet the ability to find certain types of ‘anekdotes’ funny and entertaining may be viewed a “sign of membership” in a particular discursive community.

Anekdots help to talk about non-extraordinary events and express behavioral stereotypes. In-group joke-telling is a way of establishing group norms while ‘anekdotes’ about “others” are aimed mostly at translating stereotypes and enhancing self-esteem.

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"Ours abroad" As a Theme of Humor on Ru.net: Changing Values, Competing Loyalties

Maria Yelenevska"y

Drawing on the material of humor portals, immigrant community sites, live journals and discussion forums of Ru.net, this essay analyzes how mass emigration of the first post-Soviet decades is reflected in jokelore. The advent of Ru.net and increased mobility of the population made Russian humor transnational in terms of production and dissemination. Although anekdot has retained its role as the most popular type of verbal jokelore, amusing personal experience stories (baiki) are competing with it on the internet. Observational in nature, they enable the teller to capture unusual, bizarre and absurd situations and phenomena. Immersion into a new culture and language makes this type of humorous texts suitable for rendering migrants' experiences. Humor of post-Soviet émigrés is grounded in the Soviet culture and has inherited imperial attitudes to the “Other.” Positioning themselves as colonizers of the host societies, émigrés display an ambivalent, sometimes ironic vision of the self.

Keywords: diasporic culture, emigration, internet humor, post-Soviet folklore, transnationalism

In his seminal book on the semantic mechanisms of humor Victor Raskin introduces the notion of “humor-driven cultures” referring to societies holding humor in high esteem (Raskin, 1985, p. 3). Clearly, Russian culture belongs to this category, which has been proven by the country’s recent history when anekdot evolved into the most vibrant and

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popular folklore genre, although the price of a good joke could be as high as a ten-year prison term. The political _anekdot_ was an essential part of the unofficial folk culture. Like the medieval carnival, brilliantly analyzed by Bakhtin, it opposed the existing hierarchies, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. Like carnival, it playfully revealed relativity of prevailing truths and authorities and was permeated by the desire of renewal (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 7, 11.) The demise of the Soviet Union did not consign Soviet jokelore to oblivion. Punch lines from favorite _anekdoty_ have become part and parcel of contemporary Russian phraseology. After years of circulating orally and being recorded in personal diaries, this and other comic genres like _chastushki_, sadistic verses and _baiki_ were documented in numerous Russian paper and electronic publications prepared by humor collectors who view them as a unique history of folk opposition to and subversion of the Soviet system (e.g., see Borev, 1995; 1995a; Raskin, 1995; Sarnov, 2002; _Izbrannyi sovetskii politicheskii anekdot_, http://lib.rus.ec/b/97246/read.) Outside Russia selected _anekdot_ publications, focusing on Soviet political humor appeared before _Perestroika_ thanks to émigrés. These collections became extremely popular among the general public, and some have already seen second and third editions. Moreover, Soviet jokelore has been used by scholars in social sciences and humanities for retrospective analysis of popular perceptions of historic events and uncensored attitudes of the people to Soviet ideology, power structure and the elite (see, e.g., Arhipova, 2003; Dmitriev, 1996; Gusejnov, 2004).

The primary assumption underlying this essay is that Soviet mythology and the tradition of the Soviet _anekdot_ form the antecedents of the post-Soviet jokelore. The goal of my analysis of the humor cycle “ours abroad” is to demonstrate how it reflects hybridity of post-Soviet identities and complex relations between Russia and its diaspora. We will also discuss who acts as “ours” in post-Soviet humor and what transformations the ideologically charged notions of _compatriots_ and _abroad_ have undergone in the last two decades.

**Material**

Material for the study was drawn from _Ru.net_. Although a relatively new phenomenon, posting and exchanging amusing messages on the internet has become one of the chief means of humor dissemination (Laineste, 2003; Shifman, 2007). The popularity of internet humor stems from its accessibility to large audiences, a variety of verbal and visual genres, swiftness of dissemination, and absence of censorship with regard to taboos. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) borrowed such essential feature of a carnival as anonymity and rejection of hierarchies of everyday life. Forum and chat room participants do not only use nicknames, but often “sign” their posts with stylized or manipulated images, and both are parts of the personae the users create for themselves. They are heirs to carnival masques signaling metamorphoses, violation of natural boundaries and mockery (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 39-40). Hiding behind masks, participants enjoy freedom of expression and are not inhibited
to expose those aspects of personality that are suppressed in offline communication (Dmitriev & Sychev, 2005, pp. 529-530; Feenberg, 1989, p. 272). Internet humor is significant for expatriates as a means of keeping in touch with the country of origin, maintaining transnational ties with co-ethnics, and preserving the language and culture within the community.2

Four types of websites were used for this study. The richest and the most dynamic sources were humor portals,3 such as Anekdoty iz Rossii (Jokes from Russia) www.anekdot.ru, Chertovy kulichiki (At the Back of Beyond) www.kulichki.ru, www.anekdoton.ru, and others. The content of these repositories of verbal and visual humor is organized according to genres and is updated daily. Importantly, the first two were among the pioneers of humor websites on Ru.net launched in the mid-1990s by émigré scientists and programmers. The contributions to these portals are sent by users, who also rate the posts, choosing the top ten of the day. Although, apparently, past the peak of their popularity, they systematically appear among the top 20 entertainment sites of Ru.net (http://top100.rambler.ru/top100/). The scripts of the posts, occasionally quoted sources and discussions in the chat rooms testify to the international readership of these sites.4

The second type of websites monitored was community sites in immigrant enclaves. The structure of their humor sections is almost identical with that of the humor portals, and the very choice of categories demonstrates that anekdoty, baiki, toasts, and funny and manipulated photos enjoy greatest popularity among Russophones today.5 Despite the richness of these humor collections, at some point they freeze. By contrast, humor threads in immigrant discussion forums and blogs tend to remain dynamic, and participants take part in humor production, transmission, and discussion. Orally presented jokes follow an ironic form of ritual, a performance with specific movements, gestures, and invocations (Graham, 2004, p. 177). Similarly, joke telling in forums turns into a ritual, with narrators putting their jokes in context, and readers posting commentaries, assessing the quality of humor and describing their own experiences associated with the posts discussed. While discussion threads in forums are short-lived, humor threads are maintained for years.6

The third type of websites studied was homepages of businesses and professional associations using humor thematically linked with their business domain as a gimmick to attract customers. Russian tourist agencies, for example, post humorous narratives in which “ours abroad,” immigrants and tourists alike, have to grapple with language difficulties and interpret unfamiliar cultural codes.7

Finally, humorous e-mail messages sent to me by friends were the fourth source of material. These were multiple forwards, sometimes addressed to dozens of Russophones residing in different countries. Although the sources of these messages were seldom acknowledged, most of them can be found on Ru.net sites.

Initially, 150 texts were selected for content and text analysis. Each text was checked for reproduction on other sites in identical or modified versions with the help of key words
on the search engine Yandex. The final sample was reduced to 107 texts appearing at least on three different sites, although some numbered over 50 postings. Readers’ commentaries and discussions were also subjected to analysis.

The two prevailing genres in the sample are baika and anekdot. Scholars agree that baika is one of the most productive genres of the virtual jokelore. Although claimed to be true, it implies a certain amount of amelioration or exaggeration. Its emphasis on personal experience increases the reader’s involvement in the narrative. The marriage of truth and fiction, intimacy of personal experience, and mass circulation of these stories make baika ideally suitable for the blending of personal and public spaces typical of CMC. Moreover, these features contribute to the integrative function of humor (Dmitriev & Sychev, 2005, pp. 536-7). In contemporary informal discourse baika has overtones of patronizing familiarity and connotes information that does not really deserve trust (Veselova, 2006, p. 50), but on Ru.net they appear under the rubric istorii (stories), the term associated in speech practices with higher credibility of information. Despite its claim to personal experience, a successful baika is reproduced by different users on multiple sites with variations, which is typical of anekdot. Sometimes a well-known anekdot is presented as a personal experience story, demonstrating inter-genre variations (Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002, pp. 109-110). Like anekdot, baika has to reveal a clash of beliefs, expectations, and values to gain popularity (Lutovinova 2009, pp. 79-80). Finally, it ends with a coda which is akin to the punch line of the anekdot. The popularity of baika in the humor about “ours abroad” stems from its observational nature, enabling the teller to capture bizarre and amusing situations and phenomena. Immersion into a new culture and language serves as fertile ground for such observations.

THE DIVIDED WORLD OF THE SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET HUMOR

Since creation and appreciation of humor are influenced not so much by individuals as by social forces, and humor is an indication of some discontinuity in the social system (Fine, 1983, pp. 159-160), we have to put jokes about “ours abroad” in context. According to Yuri Lotman, the starting point of any culture is dividing the world into internal (“one’s own”) and external (“their”) space. The interpretation of this binary division depends on the typology of a particular culture, but the division itself is a universal phenomenon, with the border having state, social, national, religious or some other nature (Lotman, 1996, p. 175). This is relevant to humor too, and the juxtaposition of us and the other populating our mental space is among the key themes across cultures. Whether poking fun at ethnic minorities or immigrants, elites or underdogs, invaders or past enemies, these jokes reflect societal fears, conflicts, and competition between different groups for power and resources. Moreover, they reveal complex dynamics of group auto- and hetero-stereotypes.
In the post-war decades, the most distinct “others” of the Russian jokelore were members of several ethnicities living side by side with the Russians: Jews, Georgians, Ukrainians and Chukchee. Although the number of ethnicities populating the country exceeded 100 (http://cccp.narod.ru/work/enciclop/naselen/1/html, 14/07/2007), others did not feature in the Soviet jokelore (Dratser, 1998, pp. 17-34; Shmeleva & Shmelev, 2002, pp. 47-63). Peoples living outside the country’s borders appeared mainly in international jokes, displaying ethno-stereotypes shared in many cultures. Here the repertoire of “foreign players” was also limited, primarily confronting Russian values, habits and behavioral patterns with those presumed to be stereotypically American, English, French and German (Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002, pp. 75-82). Besides, there were jokes about the Chinese and the Japanese playing on false paronymy, the alleged similarity of some Russian words to the phonology of Chinese and Japanese speech. Finally, the Finns made it to the Russian anekdot when holiday trips to Leningrad became popular in the late 1960s, and Egyptians and Israelis made their appearance after the Six-day War in the cycle devoted to the sweeping Israeli victory (Shturman & Tiktin, 1987, pp. 528-538).

Years spent behind the Iron Curtain distorted Soviet people’s perception of the world, particularly of the West. The division of the world into ours and theirs came to be reflected in the language (Gusejnov, 2000, pp. 8-21). Besides the value-neutral noun phrases za granitsei, za rubezhom (abroad), in informal discourse one could come across several slang counterparts, such as za bugrom and za kordonom, both connoting the border between the free and guarded worlds. The dissolution of the Soviet Union divided the space outside Russia into blizhnee and dal’nee zarubez’e (near and far abroad) and triggered derivation in its slang version, dal’nee zabugorie (see Schuplov, 1998, p. 212). Even today, internet humorous texts about life abroad are frequently introduced by narrators as eshche o nashikh za bugrom, iz zhizni za bugrom (Another story about ours abroad, [a scene] from life abroad), and so on. Continuous use of the Soviet slang expressions linked to the notion of “abroad” and production of the new ones testify to the perpetuation of the division of the world into us and them in the mentality of the contemporary Russian speaker.

Attempts of the Soviet propaganda to hammer into the populace a belief in the evil nature of capitalism often had a counter effect, particularly on the young (Shlapentokh, 1989, p. 142). Khrushchev’s slogan setting the goal to “catch up with and overtake America” reinforced the layperson’s image of the West as a consumer paradise and a society of plenty. For intelligentsia the West was also associated with the aura of freedom, not least the freedom of travel and mobility. Since foreign travel was restricted in the USSR, like any forbidden fruit it was considered to be a privilege and a token of trust on the part of Soviet authorities. Jobs requiring foreign travel were sought after but difficult to get. Not only those traveling on business at the expense of the state but even people wishing to sign up for short package tours had to go through the filters of party committees which scrutinized personal dossiers of the candidates and exposed them to questioning aimed at assessing the would-
be-travelers’ loyalty and “ideological maturity.” The latter included vigilance to confront provocations on the part of anti-Soviet organizations, and émigrés were considered to be among the likely provocateurs.

The 1990s saw a change in Russia’s attitudes to its diaspora. On the one hand, maintaining ties with “compatriots” abroad became a political strategy. This is reflected in the emergence of various state-sponsored organizations aimed at promoting contacts with immigrant communities and making use of immigrants’ connections in host countries that could benefit Russia politically and economically. On the other hand, in popular mentality, the stigma of emigration has not disappeared and the attitude to émigrés sometimes betrays mixed feelings of envy and contempt for people who “deserted” Fatherland in the period of political chaos and economic hardship. The words “emigration” and “émigré” have to a large extent retained negative connotations acquired in Soviet times when they were associated with betrayal and exile and are seldom used by émigrés themselves. Thus, an investigation of personal narratives of ex-Soviets in Israel, showed that even talking about relocation most of the subjects avoided using the words “repatriation,” “to emigrate” or “to immigrate” when they described their experience but showed clear preference for value-neutral “leave,” “depart,” “arrive,” or “come” (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya, 2007, pp. 162-163). German researchers investigating diasporic cultures on the internet also noted this attitude among Russian labor migrants, who perceive themselves as “guests” (Schmidt et al., 2006, p. 126).

Another motif relevant to understanding humor about “ours abroad” is the feeling of injured pride and nostalgia for the “super power” status of Russia which is boosted and manipulated by the nationalist mass media and popular culture. As investigation into the folklore of ex-Soviets shows, émigrés are not immune to these feelings either (see, e.g., Fialkova & Yelenevskaya, 2007, pp. 129-135).

Finally, the theme of ambivalence in the relationship with the homeland often emerges in the émigrés’ folklore. The émigrés of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet period do not identify with the image of the Fatherland that dominated official Soviet discourse and mass culture; nor do they share nostalgia expressed by the émigrés of the post-revolutionary period. Bitterness challenging the official ideology and ironically alluding to the messianic vision of their role by the émigrés of the first wave11: sounds in the following rhyme:

**Россия! Чудо мирозданья**  
*И наша Родина она.*  
*Мы не в изгнанье, Мы в посланье.*  
*В посланье В...*  
*И К...*  
*И НараГ! (www.znanie-sila.ru/online/issue_2239.html)*

(Russia! She is the wonder of the universe, and she is our Motherland. We are not in exile, we are envoys. Envoys... told to get lost!).
Unlike their predecessors, émigrés of the last wave have few illusions about their ability to influence events in their homeland. Although today return migration is possible, dreams about homecoming are no longer a theme of the diaspora discourse. This, however, does not mean that émigrés try to seamlessly integrate into host societies, abandoning their own language and culture. Rather, using the current trends in the policies of Western societies tolerant of multilingualism and multiculturalism, Russophones try to domesticate their new environment, getting the best of both worlds. This involves appraising values and customs of the receiving society from the position of one’s own culture. So the jokelore about “ours abroad” reflects to a large degree estrangement and outsidersness. Bakhtin saw the latter as a powerful factor in understanding other cultures: “We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7.) At the same time this search for the meaning of a foreign culture may result in deeper understanding of our own.

In the humor about “ours abroad” the exploration of the new environment is entrusted to the figures, whose antecedents can be found in the rogue, the clown and the fool. Bakhtin indicates that their distinctive feature and a privilege is to be “other,” the right not to make common cause with any of the existing categories, and ability to expose the underside and falseness of situations. They are laughed at by others, but also by themselves. Bakhtin (1981) emphasizes that these are masks granted the right not to understand, to confuse and tease (pp. 158-167). Immersed in the new culture, immigrants also try on different masks. They exploit their ignorance by playing fools. They act as clowns amusing others and themselves by exotic speech and behavior, and they turn into rogues when they break conventions of the receiving society. These masks change as situations require, and mischievous transformations and metamorphoses bring the image of “ours abroad” close to the folkloric trickster who appears primarily at the points of growth and change (Hynes & Doty, 1993, p. 4), and who always faces the challenge of finding a way out of difficult situations (Abrahamian 1999, p. 7, as cited from http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/abramyan1.htm).

Despite a vivid interest of the Soviet people in the life abroad, humor about “ours” in alien lands was scarce, and either related to the Jewish emigration, or to awkward and clumsy behavior of those who were trusted by the authorities to travel to the West. Opening of the borders and mass emigration of the 1990s made this theme much more visible in the emerging folklore of the post-Soviet period. Discovering the world face-to-face instead of through the mediation of literature, movie and media, triggered an explosion of humor presenting émigrés vis-à-vis various host societies.

REFUGEES OR CONQUERORS?

Despite a vivid interest of the Soviet people in the life abroad, humor about “ours” in alien lands was scarce, and either related to the Jewish emigration, or to awkward and clumsy behavior of those who were trusted by the authorities to travel to the West. Opening of the borders and mass emigration of the 1990s made this theme much more visible in the emerging folklore of the post-Soviet period. Discovering the world face-to-face instead of through the mediation of literature, movie and media, triggered an explosion of humor presenting émigrés vis-à-vis various host societies.
Even though the maxim “there is power in numbers” is not part of the Russian paremiological repertoire, it summarizes the most salient theme in my sample. In social sciences immigrants are justifiably treated as underprivileged minorities with low socio-economic status, either forced to renounce their language and culture or driven to the self-exile of ghettoization. Even groups belonging to the so called privileged migration often suffer from alienation from the host society and acculturation shock. Many ex-Soviet émigrés experienced this, but in the paradoxical world of joke lore we observe the reversal of majority/minority roles:

1. Your country seems to look more and more like Israel. Why?
   There are plenty of Russians here…
   (www.anekdot.ru, 19/05/2009)

2. - How come, not everyone in Israel can speak Russian yet?
   - Forty years is not such a long term.
   (www.anekdot.ru, 20/06/09)

3. A friend of mine is in a taxi with his girlfriend in Geneva, well, and he is chatting with her in Russian. They get off, and when he pays, the taxi driver asks:
   - Excuse me, were you talking Hebrew to your lady friend?
   One has to mention that my friend has typical Ryazan looks and naturally his jaw drops. So he asks the driver what made him think so. The driver apologizes and replies:
   - I’ve just returned from Israel, and everyone there speaks this language.
   (http://forum.israelinfo.ru/viewtopic.php?t=1299&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=3, 02/12/2008)

4. Germany. The year 2014. Two policemen patrol the town and bump into a well-dressed man lying on a sidewalk drunk. They check his pockets and fish out his ID.
   One policeman says to the other: Just look at this, Petrō! Isn’t it a funny name — Muller!
   (http://germany.worlds.ru/anekdots/page2.shtml, 15/04/2009)

The scene of these texts is usually set in big enclaves, such as Canada and Germany, but most of them are related to Israel, where the concentration of ex-Soviets is, indeed, the highest. The Russianness of the émigrés is not determined by their ethnic belonging, but by the language [2, 3]. Indeed, in most of the countries where ex-Soviets settled, in popular parlance they are referred to as “Russians,” irrespective of their ethnicity or place of origin. To increase the persuasive effect, the narration is conducted from the perspective of outsiders, residents of other countries perceiving Israel as overwhelmingly Russian [1, 3].
Note that in [3] the narrator refers to the “Ryazan’ looks” of the protagonist, a cliché used to describe typical Russian appearances, which underscores that he is most unlikely to be mistaken for an Israeli and a Hebrew speaker. Another feature worthy of attention is that like in the Soviet anekdot, post-Soviet jokes about Israel often use biblical allusions [2], with Moses being the key figure (Yelenyevskaya, 2008, p. 67). The anekdot about German policemen [4] exploits names as markers of ethnicity and group belonging (see Fialkova & Yelenyevskaya, 2007, pp. 121-124). Notably, the text is bilingual, and the Ukrainian name Petró is justified by the insertion of Ukrainian words in the punch line pronounced by a “typical” German policeman of the future. Another version of this anekdot takes the paradoxical situation even further by turning a respectable-looking “native” German into a bomzh (a down-and-out), and the two policemen mixing Russian and Ukrainian are named Petró and Ali, an obvious hint at the Russification and Ukrainization of the entire population of Germany, including its Muslim sector (http://www.germany-rus.net, 12/05/2009).

It is difficult to say whether some of these texts were not borrowed from the jokelore of the host countries in which members of the lay public feel revulsion against immigrant groups refusing to assimilate and abandon their language and culture. But whatever their primary source, these humorous texts reflect the competition between majority and minority groups for power. Jokes about immigrants told by members of the majority often enter the repertoire of immigrants themselves (Davies, 1990, p. 311) portraying newcomers in awkward situations that occur due to their inability to speak the majority language adequately or because they are unfamiliar with local cultural codes. Texts of this type also appear in immigrant folklore of the Russophones, though its prevailing mood is different: newcomers feel more at home than the hosts and expect the latter to pick up their own language, habits and values. The situation and role inversion which we observe in these and the following examples are typical of trickster stories in traditional folklore. No order is too rooted for the trickster, and what prevails is toppled (Hynes, 1993, p. 37). But while the mythical figure is usually presented as an individual hero in opposition to his community (Makarius, 1993, p. 86), the immigrant trickster embodies the opposition of a minority group to the majority.

5. France has expelled a Russian speech-therapist, a maniac who was secretly teaching local children to speak without burring (Although the loan verb grassirovat’ denoting the French pronunciation of the fricative “r” is well-integrated in Russian, in informal discourse it is often replaced by kartavit’ [burr] connoting that this type of pronunciation is viewed as abnormal.) (www.hultura.ru/78.html, 17/02/09)

6. An opinion poll in Germany. They ask a Russian:
   - What country do you like?
   - Germany.
-What language are you learning?
-German.
-Why?
-I’d like to stay here.
Then they ask a German:
-What country do you like?
-Germany.
-What language are you learning?
-Russian.
-Why????14
-I’d like to stay here.
(http://germany.worlds.ru/anekdots/page2.shtml, 06/03/2009)

7. Jerusalem 1991. It’s winter and it snows (!!!) Since there were no snow ploughs available yet, tanks were brought in to remove snow from the streets. In downtown Jerusalem a group of tipsy Russians pass an orthodox Jew (He is wearing a hat, and his side locks reach down to his shoulders) He looks around and says, his voice sad and somber: “Snow, tanks... Russians... Where am I????!!”

Whether forced to learn the language of a minority, or change the accent in their own mother tongue, members of the host society are presented as the colonized, while émigrés assume the role of colonizers. Even the jobs of the protagonists in the quoted texts [4, 5]—policemen maintaining law and order, and a speech therapist correcting defects in the native language of the host population—are unlikely to be held by newcomers. Besides insisting on speaking their mother tongue and making others do the same, the “colonizers” exhibit patterns of behavior that are internationally associated with the stereotype of the Russians, such as drunkenness. Note that [7] also plays on the stereotypical image of Russia as a snow-clad country and on the Soviet reputation of an aggressor marching with tanks along the streets of peaceful cities—the image that evolved in the West after the events of 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia.

Although referring to the first years of mass immigration from the FSU, this *anekdot* remains popular and keeps reappearing in various émigré blogs and forums. The posters and their “guests” are amused by the seriousness with which a snowfall is taken by the “locals” perceiving it as their weakness:

Last week there was a heavy snowfall in Jerusalem. Everyone was in a terrible panic. I had an important meeting scheduled for that day but it was cancelled, because sort of “You won’t be able to get to us” So here is a *baika* in connection to this. (http://sakerdonchik.livejournal.com/948.html, 4/07/2009.)
An American blogger supplies the text with a photo of a snow-drift and an emphatic introduction:

OH-OH-OH, WHAT A DISASTER!!! IT SNOWS IN ATLANTA!!! Classes in schools, and also in colleges and universities are cancelled! You should see it!!!!

Another nuance worthy of attention in [7] is that the person anxious about the “Russian” metamorphosis of Jerusalem is an orthodox Jew. Russian-speaking Israelis are predominantly secular and anticlerical, which is reflected both in the media and informal discourse, as well as in the agenda of most Russian-speaking politicians. Thus, a subtle detail points to intercommunity tensions aggravated by the massive immigration wave from the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU).

Many humorous texts portraying “ours abroad” celebrate drinking habits, daredevil behavior, excessive trust in good luck, and disrespect for the law. These patterns of behavior may be criticized at home, but away from home vice often turns into merit and is seen as an aid to surviving in an unfamiliar or hostile environment. Moreover, behavioral characteristics that are often used as hetero-stereotypes, for example, when Jews tell jokes about drunkenness of the Russians, or Ukrainians about boasting and swindling of the moskali (Ukrainian and Byelorussian pejorative for “Russians”) are transformed into auto-stereotypes, since the main division into “us” and “them” is not along the ethnic lines, but the opposition of newcomers vs. hosts.

For many ex-Soviets, emigration resulted in the drop in the socio-economic status, at least in the first period after relocation. But side by side with the humor that attempts to make light of the initial downward mobility and disappointment of university graduates compelled to work as unskilled laborers in poorly paid jobs, there are compensatory jokes presenting members of one’s own group as smarter and intellectually superior to the members of the host society.

8. A math teacher at an American college is chatting with a colleague, a teacher of geography.
Math teacher: -I can’t figure out where rumors about good education of Russian immigrant children come from. Say, one [of my students] refers to ordinary English numerals as Arabic. Can you imagine this? More than that, he speaks about some Roman numerals too!!!
Geographer: -Ha! He’s a dimwit, or what? Sort of, he claims that in Italy they use one type of numerals and in Barcelona some other!!!
(http://aneck.ru/node/1655, 24/06/2009)
Once I was watching a TV program shot in the U.S. Journalists asked 10 passers-by: What would you do if you found out that one of your friends were a *homo sapiens*? Nine out of ten answered something of the sort: I don’t have such friends, or I would stop our friendship, or I would prohibit my family to meet him, and so on. And only one said that *homo sapiens* was a man of reason and spoke about the tree of origin of the human (that is Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and so on.) Then he added in Russian: *Rossiane*, hi there. This was a bang, cool.

(http://psychology.net.ru/talk/viewtopic.php?t=18829, 06/06/2009)

Notably, educational superiority of “ours” over their foreign peers in these and similar texts is displayed by the knowledge that does not go beyond school curricula. This ensures the accessibility of the humor to large audiences. Sometimes it is also expression of self-irony and reassessment of one’s knowledge and skills that in many cases turned out to be incompatible with the requirements of western labor markets. In the quoted texts the claim to educational achievements forms a sharp contrast with the style of narration. The use of vulgarisms and the broken syntax typical of conversational style of lower classes makes one question educational accomplishments of the narrators themselves.

It is well known that humor based on superiority testifies to anxiety about the self. The proliferation of the texts presenting the foreign *other* as the *ignoramus* occurred in early and mid-1990s and reflected concern of ethnic and labor migrants about integration into the western labor market. A new wave of these jokes in the second half of the current decade coincides with heated discussions in the media about the deterioration of the Russian media system of education. Significantly, among the versions of [9] I came across one that quoted it almost word for word but moved the setting of the TV program to Russia replacing the punch line with “Ukrainians, hi there!” Another site decided to conduct a poll among the visitors using the responses “I don’t have such friends,” “I would stop our friendship” and adding to them “I am also a homo sapiens!” According to the posted result, only 59% of the respondents chose the third option. A lively exchange of comments followed, in which some users suggested the poll was a prank. Others, however, took it seriously and were scandalized by the scores. Still others claimed that it could not have happened in Russia, and that such a poll could be conducted only in the U.S. A. (http://69.lv?m=votes_show&v_id=54&p=1, 23/07/2009). Extended answers to the same questions (or a parody of the expected naïve responses?) were posted by a blogger and also triggered a discussion. The comments were serious and analytical, some of them pointing out that ignorance revealed by the respondents was a symptom of Russia’s social ills (http://www.24open.ru/wwwlas/blog/744936/, 23/07/2009).

Although among émigrés from the FSU many are employed as unskilled laborers doing manual work or hired as domestic help, they seldom appear in humorous texts. The jokelore about “ours abroad” can give one the impression that the majority of émigrés are well-settled academics and programmers:
10. **What sort of institution is an American university?**
   - It’s a place where Russian professors teach Chinese students (in some versions the answer continues with “and all of this is financed by the American taxpayer”)
   (www.anek-dot.ru, 26/07/2009)

11. In the past ten years, among those who left Russia to earn money abroad there were 5,670 physicists, 1,349 chemists, 986 health workers and not a single employee of the Road Police.
   (http://ostrovforum.net, 29/05/2009)

Widely circulating in the 1990s among the émigrés, [10] was the folklore response to the mass emigration of researchers. Its popularity was reinforced by reiteration in heated discussions about the dangers of brain drain for Russian economy (see a special issue of the journal *Znanie — Sila* (Knowledge is Power) devoted to this problem www.znanie-sila.ru/online/issue_2239.html, 14/07/2009). Although analyses of Russian sociologists of science and some émigré scientists indicate that this *anekdot* is a gross exaggeration (see Dezhina, 2003 & Goldfeld, 2007), in discussion forums it is sometimes quoted as proof of Russia’s intellectual power and might (see, e.g., discussion at http://www.intellectualcapital.ru/iss3-25/icoping25-2htm). Today, an increasing number of people realize that the evolution of the knowledge society is changing the prestige of professions. What was considered to be lucrative occupations in early post-Soviet Russia does not promise bright future elsewhere. The brain drain showed to the Russian public that with the opening of borders mobility of professions has become an important issue. The old Russian proverb *Gde rodilsia, tam i prigodilsia* (Your true place is your birthplace) has become obsolete. With many young Russians looking to the West in search of new opportunities, [11] has gained considerable popularity. Professions that brought people to the brink of poverty in the early 1990s are again considered an asset since they “travel” and can be used on job markets outside Russia.

Besides showing off their intellect, “ours abroad” often use it to take advantage of the hosts who are portrayed as naïve and incapable of imagining how witty and creative newcomers can be when they bypass the rules or cheat. In full correspondence with the traditions of Russian and Soviet folk culture, the violators, who appear as tricksters, are proud when they manage to cheat companies and authorities of the receiving countries, but would not admit to deceiving individuals. Humorous trickster stories are often accompanied by comments evaluating trickster-type behavior. Sometimes they contain mild criticism and self irony on the part of the narrator hinting that the tricks are nothing but instruments to survival. More often, however, the introduction to a narrative or its coda celebrates the triumph of the trickster who managed to beat the system: “Here we go, our side has won
again!” or “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and “Nothing ventured, nothing had” — this really applies to the Russian-speaking diaspora”(www.anekdot.ru (posted on 28/06/2004). Previous research has shown that immigration does not change the attitude to the state, ex-Soviets still feel it is a relationship of confrontation requiring defense on their part. Contemporary tricksters justify their duplicitous behavior by the weakness of their socio-economical position (Fialkova & Yeleneskaya, 2006, p. 292).

In the humor about “ours abroad” we often come across allusions to the Soviet past, be it management of resources in the times of defitsit (shortages), exploration of the outer space, or the much heralded success in the arts and sports competition. The event which stands out among those that shape self-perception and contributes to group solidarity is Victory in World War II. On the basis of representative surveys conducted in Russia in the 1990s, the sociologist Lev Gudkov observes that the Victory remains for the majority of the respondents, and for the society as a whole, the most important element of collective identity, a benchmark for evaluating the past, and to some extent, for understanding the present and the future (Gudkov, 2004, p. 24). The significance of the War for contemporary Russian culture is reflected in the language. Quotations from War songs, poems and novels are routinely used in everyday talk and have acquired a semiotic status. Although today many might be unable to trace their origin, these quotations have become markers of specific situations and function like proverbs and sayings (Yeleneskaya, 2008, pp. 126-127). While during the War years cartoons, chastushki and jokes deriding the enemy were popular both at the front and in the rear, they virtually disappeared from the postwar jokelore. Only recently the theme of World War II has come back in the anekdot and baika. As a rule, their number increases in May when Russia celebrates Victory over Nazism. Many of these texts blend the War theme with experiences of our contemporaries, both at home and abroad.

12. I heard this from a friend who has been living in the U.S. for six years now and works for a large American company programming games. He told me this story on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Victory Day (…)

Nostalgic for the good old 1990s, we bought a game about World War II, just in time for the Victory Day anniversary. (…) So we played for the Russians and won. Then for fun we played for the Germans, and what was weird is that despite the overwhelming superiority of forces, there was always at least one front, where the Soviet troops won, after which all the fascists were done over. And whatever we tried, there was absolutely no way one could win the War for Germany!

So I bet with the Americans that it is specified somewhere in the program that the Germans cannot win. We cracked the source code and started looking. I don’t remember where exactly, but I did find it. Only my Yankee colleagues couldn’t figure out why I was in raptures. There was a sentence commented out in the code:
“And this is because, as long as at least a single Russian is alive, we won’t give away our Fatherland to you, bastards!”

Yeah, it seems, there were our guys among the developers. ‘Happy Victory Day,’ folks! (www.anekdot.ru, 9/05/09)

Defiance that sounds in this narrative is not accidental. To their surprise, and frequently anger, émigrés discovered that the views of the host societies on the War and the role of the USSR in it, differ greatly from the beliefs of the general public in Russia. The removal of monuments to the fallen soldiers of the Red Army in the countries of Eastern Europe and in some countries of the FSU was extensively covered by the Russian mass media and triggered furious discussions on the internet, and even interethnic clashes in real world, for example in Estonia. These events and the pompous celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Victory in 2005 mobilized renewed interest in the War among the young in the Russophone world. Ru.net responded to this by creating numerous sites ranging from collections of documents to selections of anti-Nazi cartoons and jokes of the period (see http://victory-day.ru/?Anekdoty_pro_fashistov, http://hyves.dryagin.ru/?cat=3, http://gregory-house.fun.tut.ua/658/3551/, 20/07/2009). Moreover, baiki grounded in the Soviet vision of the War but transferred to the present-day reality became popular on humor portals. A distinct feature of folk perception of the War is that it is focused on the destruction of the enemy; that is, it reveals orientation to the past, rather than focusing on the positive effects of the victory oriented to the future (Gudkov, 2004, p. 28).

In [12], the triumph of the narrator stems not only from the trick which makes a “replay” of the War according to the wrong scenario impossible, but in the elimination of the allies from the War scene. It is hardly likely that even if such a computer game were produced in the U.S.A., it would use the script with just two armies, the Red and the Nazi. The contribution of the allies to the Victory was minimized in the Soviet historiography and propaganda, and the young generation has internalized this simplified version of the War. Americans, and in the case of this narrative, members of the host society, emerge as naïve bystanders. Neither are they included in the Victory Day celebrations, nor are they capable of enjoying the sabotage of the controversial product.

Only few texts in the analyzed sample deal with tourists’ experiences abroad, and most of them are narratives related to encounters with émigrés. Like the texts quoted above, they show amusement at the ability of “our people” to preserve familiar habits and values, and as a result émigrés are not perceived as outsiders. They belong to us rather than to them. On the other hand, behavior deviating from the known patterns, which results from the secondary socialization, is presented as unnatural and becomes the butt of this humor. On the whole, the image of a contemporary émigré tends to be sympathetic, with some texts implying that emigration is a loss of valuable human resources, and the gaps noticeable today may also affect the future.
13. Why has Odessa team stopped participating in KVN? Don’t “Gentlemen” have children?
   -Sure, “Gentlemen” have children, but they speak English, and some of them speak Hebrew. (www.anekdot.ru, 30/06/2009)

Migration of favorite comedians may be more noticeable to a layperson than exodus of scientists, doctors and engineers. Although the Russian TV today has a huge number of comedy shows, many satisfy only unsophisticated tastes. As the quoted anekdot shows, there is nostalgia for the traditions of the Soviet humor swept away by the advent of new trends in popular culture and by geo-political changes that triggered emigration (Similar motifs emerged in the discussion posted at http://forum.ichip.ru/index.php?showtopic=8809&st=15, 26/04/2009).

A negative vision of émigrés is sometimes demonstrated in the forums evaluating posted humor. One example is a discussion thread on www.anekdot.ru that followed a narrative about the life of “ours” in Toronto. It turned into an exchange of mutual accusations, in which émigrés were blamed for superiority attitudes to the home country, arrogance and preoccupation with their own success. Émigrés in their turn referred to their opponents as “patriots” pointing to ethnic intolerance, which, indeed, colors some of the postings (http://gb.anekdot.ru/gb/332725.html,1/07/2009).

Yet, although flaming is a common phenomenon in forums, hostility towards émigrés on humor websites is a relatively rare phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

Post-Soviet humor about “ours abroad” is transnational in terms of creation and dissemination. Jokes, personal narratives, poems, sadistic verses and texts structured as lists and portraying the life of ex-Soviets in the USA, Canada, Israel, Finland, and other countries keep reappearing on various humor portals of Ru.net, in discussion forums, chat groups, blogs, and in e-mail messages. Sometimes they circulate for years, updated and enriched by new details. Like oral joke-telling, they generate metatext found in discussants’ comments. Even those texts whose authorship is known, with time lose signature and are posted as anonymous, or presented as personal experience stories of the narrators, which is a clear sign of their folklorization.

Transnationality is constituted through the dialectical relations of the grounded and flighty, the settled and flowing…” (Jackson et al., 2004, p. 8) In the contemporary Russian jokelore homeland and diaspora constantly interact reflecting on the common past, exchanging stories about new experiences, and feeding each other with new topics. Russian
and Soviet historical and cultural heritage form the background to this folklore. The Soviet past has not been dismissed but is still subject to reflection and re-negotiation.

The image of “ours abroad” is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is self-adulatory and emphasizes the superiority of one’s own group over the host society often referred to as the “locals” or “aboriginals.” On the other hand, it is not devoid of self-irony and realization that many of those very qualities that émigrés despised in the Soviet personality proved to be hardwired in their mentality and behavior, and sometimes even come handy in the moments of stress caused by integration and acculturation.

An essential role in diasporal humor belongs to language. The Russian language serves as the primary marker of identity, a safe haven providing comfort, and a resource for word play with the newly acquired language of the host country. Most importantly, it is the medium in which transnational post-Soviet culture is evolving. As the Israeli poet and publisher Irina Vrubel-Golubkina observed, Russia stopped being an empire and gave way to the empire of the Russian language that thrives in the virtual world (2009).

**ENDNOTES**

1. While anekdot and chastushka are often used in the English language scholarly literature devoted to Russian folklore, baika, a short tale describing a funny and amusing event allegedly experienced by the narrator or someone from his/her circle of friends, is less familiar to the Western reader. Since neither a tall tale nor a shaggy dog story would adequately render the nature of this genre, I will use the original Russian term.

2. Ru.net is a major source of humor columns in the Russian-language press published outside Russia. This is the case with such papers as American *Panorama Daigest*, Canadian *Russkii Ekspress*, German *Russkaya Germania*, Greek *Athens Ellas*, and Israeli *Vesti*.

3. Shifman coined the term “humor hubs” for such websites and divides them into those dedicated to humor explicitly and “viral” email sites, dynamic archives of material circulated by “pass-along or “viral” emails (Shifman 2007: 192).

4. The ultimate proof of the popularity of www.anekdot.ru is that it has become the target for jokes. Anekdot-telling was a narrative theme of Soviet jokelore, and the meta-joke is viewed by humor researchers as a generic subcategory (Graham 2004: 169). The pervasiveness of humor portals has become a subcategory of the post-Soviet jokelore both in Russia and in the diaspora: You’ve lived in America too long if you spend more time chatting with your pals in the Russian-language forum of www.anekdot.ru than with members of your family. http://www.averikov.com/forum/showthread.php?t=3974, 22/09/2004


6. As an illustration see the following numbers: The American forum “Russians abroad—Life abroad in all its manifestations”http://www.rusforum.com, the thread “Jokes” was started on 25/06/2002 and had 2,318 posts and 179,361 viewings registered. The Finnish forum “Creativity and Humor,” the thread “Tell a joke” was started on 10/06/2006 and had 1,964 posts and 75,244 viewings. The Israeli forum “Folks” www.israelinfo.ru, the thread “A joke from each—are you up to it?” was started on 28/08/2003 and had 1,287 posts and 121,916 viewings (Last accessed 28/04/2009.)

8. The dates following internet resources indicate when they were accessed.

9. The original argot meaning of bugor was a border of the prison camp separating it from the free space (Mokienko and Nikitina 2001: 79). The noun kordon is close to the meaning of the English “cordon.” It is a guarded border and implies that free movement across it is impossible (See definition in Ozhegov 2001: 244).

10. The questionnaire to be filled out before a trip to the West was identical with the one for jobs which presupposed contacts with foreigners. One of the entries required mentioning of the maiden name of the applicant’s mother to expose Jews, Tartars, Gypsies, etc., children of mixed marriages. Another entry probed for possible contacts abroad asking whether the applicant or any of his/her relatives had been prisoners of war or interned during World War II. In the 1970s and early 1980s, members of the post-war generation were much amused by the absurdity of this entry when applied to them.

11. Even researchers specializing in the literature of the Russian diaspora cannot agree which of the writers of the so called “old generation” coined the motto My ne v izgnan’i, my v poslan’i some attributing it to D. Merezhkovsky, others to Z. Gyppius, or N. Berberova. For decades Soviet Russia ignored the contribution of the Diaspora to its culture. Critical of Soviet and post-Soviet politics and social policies, émigrés of the second half of the 20th century do not hope to be appreciated or respected there later. Many are convinced that their Fatherland is indifferent to them and their desire to contribute to the wellbeing of the nation. These skeptical and pessimistic ideas were summarized in the poignant rhyme by the émigré writer Yuz Aleshkovsky. He exposes the futility of messianic aspirations of the “old generation” by clashing the cited motto with the allusion to the principle that guided relations of the GULAG prisoners with the authorities: Ne ver’, ne boysia, ne prosi (Do not trust, do not be afraid, do not plead).

12. All the translations of the quoted anekdoty and baiki are my own.

13. Ryazan’ is a city in central Russia.

14. Multiple exclamation and question marks or the combination of the two are often used in online communication to express emotions.

15. The noun Rossiane is not an ethnonym. It refers to all citizens of Russia irrespective of their ethnicity. Although not new, it moved from periphery to the center of the lexical system when the Soviet Union fell apart.

16. Concern about the quality of schooling is manifested in the emergence of jocular multiple-choice tests circulating on the Ru.net and giving users an opportunity to evaluate the knowledge of facts forming the basis of the school curricula in various subjects. See, for example, regularly updated tests at http://children.kulichki.net/vopros/logika.htm.

17. The key words “Great Patriotic War” yield 16 million pages.

18. KVN stands for “The Club of the Merry and the Resourceful” and is the most famous television comedy in the Russophone World. Launched in 1961 during Khrushchev’s Thaw, it was one of the few live programs of the period. KVN was closed down in 1971 for being too audacious and unpredictable but reappeared on the central TV in 1986. “Gentlemen of Odessa” were the first winners of the program in the Perestroika period and remain the best remembered team. Some of them became professional comedians, and some emigrated (see Dunn 2004: 182-184; Khhait). For example, one of the better known “gentlemen” Jan Levinzon, is the founding father of KVN in Israel and the anchorman of the humor program “Seven Forty” on the Russian-language channel of the Israeli TV.
REFERENCES


NEW RUSSIANS IN ANEKDOTS

VLADIMIR KARASIK

The article deals with New Russians — the newly rich who were much spoken about during the Perestroika period and became the topic of a great number of anekdots in Russia. These people were basically regarded as extremely rich, illiterate, criminal and, paradoxically, rather unhappy. The attitudes to the nouveau riches in Russian anekdots differ between older and younger generations and more and less educated people. I argue that New Russians have inherited certain features from Soviet Georgians, their anecdotal predecessors. The logic of anekdots suggests that traditional negative attitudes toward the conspicuous display of wealth is to a certain degree exaggerated. The idea that New Russians are unhappy seems to be a type of overcompensation and self-promotion for those who ridicule the newly rich.

Keywords: New Russians, anekdots, concept analysis, stereotypes, cultural images

Anekdots in Russian communicative practice have repeatedly attracted the attention of scholars who study the nature of humor and cultural peculiarity of Russian mentality [Attardo, 2001; Karasik, 2004; Kulinich, 1999; Raskin, 1985; Shmeleva and Shmelev, 2002; Slishkin, 2004]. Anekdot is understood in Russian as a short humorous narrative and has very little to do with its original predecessor — an unpublished, humorous episode in the life of some celebrity. Actually a Russian anekdot is a joke devoid of spontaneous birth. A modern anekdot is a genre of urban folklore and as such is very interesting to study because it reflects topics and attitudes relevant to common people in the street, undergoes no official censorship and hence may be regarded as a valid instrument of public opinion measurement.

As a folklore text, anekdot has all the necessary elements of a narrative.

First, it is assumed that a story teller keeps in mind valued themes, events and characters known to be amusing. There is a special word in Russian — “anekdotchik” — a person who is a master of telling anekdots or the one who especially enjoys this practice.

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Second, people know how to react to various anekdots. Since these jokes are not spontaneous, anekdots predetermine typical behavioral patterns of listening to them: smiling in advance, thinking immediately of one’s own new funny things to tell the audience, or if one feels that the circumstances are not quite suitable for anekdots one can attempt to interrupt the telling of a potentially inappropriate joke.

Third, there are typical subgenres of anekdots circulating in modern or comparatively modern Russian society. One can distinguish among anecdotal events (anekdots proper), anecdotal classifications, anecdotal riddles, and anecdotal performances. The following examples may illustrate each subgenre (here and further on translations of Russian into English are mine. — V.K).

1. A man is falling from a sky-scraper. Suddenly he is caught by a mighty hand, and somebody asks him a question: “What’s the time?” — “Oh, a quarter to nine!” — “That’s a pity,” and the fist unclenches.

2. There are two types of people, the first one is made of those who like to subdivide everything into two types.

3. Is it possible to wrap an elephant into a newspaper? Yes, if there is a speech by Khrushchev published in it. [Nikita Khrushchev, Russian political leader, was notorious for his long speeches].

4. Do you know, Petro, how the moskals call our “pyvo” [beer]? — “Ptiivo! I would kill them all.” [Here a Ukrainian accent is imitated, the name Petro is a stereotyped name for a Ukrainian, “moskal” is slang in Ukrainian for a Russian, and the difference in the Russian and Ukrainian pronunciations if the high-front vowel (i) is ridiculed. Thus a minor comparison of differences in pronunciation is taken as an invitation to demonstrate hatred for Russians, which is absurd and, thus, funny].

Each subgenre exists in a variety of forms and sometimes merges with other subgenres, e.g. when a classification is a part of a narrative.

Fourth, there are typical heroes or characters featuring in anekdots, and each hero is a functional embodiment of certain weak points which make him a character similar to Italian commedia del arte. This is a fundamental peculiarity of folklore texts brilliantly analyzed by Vladimir Propp in his “Morphology of Fairy-Tale” [Propp, 1928]. In every fairy-tale we can meet the Main Hero, his Adversary, an Assistant to the Main Hero, a False Hero, a Trickster, etc. Typical heroes in Russian anekdots come from various sources. Mothers-in-law, traffic police, dystrophic people, political leaders, and representatives of different ethnic groups make perfect targets for humor in anekdots. Many of them have proper names, for example, Chapaev (a well-known brave but impulsive hero of the Civil war), Stirlitz (an extremely popular character from a TV series about the exploits of a Soviet spy working in Nazi Germany), Abram (a cunning, greedy and ever complaining Jew), Ghivi (a rich impulsive and extravagant Georgian). Some are identified by ethnic labels, like
Chukchi (a naïve simpleton from far away province in the Far East). One can easily see that anecdotal characters often represent either biased ethnic images, or recognizable social types who are easy to find fault with. Here belongs New Russian, a nouveau riche, rather young and self-assured, half-criminal, uneducated and very extravagant in his behavior. New Russians as social figures suddenly emerged in Russia during the perestroika period. They were much talked about and soon became heroes of innumerable anekdots and as such they display in their collective image the ideas important for understanding basic values of Russian mentality and may be regarded as keys to understanding vital strategies of Russian humor.

**NEW RUSSIANS IN ANEKDOTS:**

**OBJECTIVES AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

The material analyzed in the paper was collected in the Internet and books of anekdots published in Russia. The total number of the texts is about 1000 examples. The objective of my analysis was to find out folklore roots of behavior of the hero depicted in the jokes, to reveal the attitudes to the New Russian as highlighted in anekdots and to see whether these attitudes correspond to traditional Russian antipathy towards the rich. The new Russian as a folklore character is presented by E.Shmeleva (2003).

The methods applied to study the material are concept analysis, hermeneutic interpretation and introspection. The concept analysis is three-dimensional explanation of the idea represented by a word or a word combination which denote a certain mental or physical entity [Karasik, 2004].

The first dimension is aimed at finding the basic features of the notion analyzed as presented in definitions found in the dictionaries or elsewhere. The definition is a logical operation used to single out generic and specific features of the notion explained and it is its content minimum. Igor Yakovenko gives a succinct notional analysis of the concept in question:

New Russians are representatives of a new social stratum which appeared in Russia in the end of Perestroika, they are entrepreneurs or highly paid managers who have very high income and are characterized by a specific mode of life. These people are reflected in mass consciousness in two different ways. As a phenomenon, they are energetic workaholics, who have quickly and suddenly became rich, they take risk in their business, are often well educated and are oriented at the Western consumption society individualistic and materialistic standards of life. Being rich they are envied by the majority of poor population, despised by intelligentsia (who esteem unpractical spiritual values) and are bound with criminals (whom they hire for protection and with whom they occasionally merge). As a myth, they are reflected in anekdots in the caricature
image of extravagant extremely rich half-criminals and low educated rednecks with solid golden chains, dressed in crimson jackets, driving very expensive cars, spending their vacation at prestigious foreign resorts, speaking jail slang and using specific jail gestures.

We can see that phenomenon and myth only partially coincide. The generic component of the notion is that New Russians are newly rich men, and this feature is basic for various specific ramification both in objective and subjective development of the concept. Their objective features are functional and rational in their essence whereas their subjective manifestations are perceptive and emotional. We can enumerate the features described in the following way: 1) men, 2) very rich, 3) suddenly rich, 4) comparatively young, usually about thirty, 5) making business, 6) taking risks, 7) practical, 8) not law abiding, 9) extravagantly wasting money, 10) trying to impress others by symbols of a rich life, 11) behaving like criminals.

The second dimension of a concept analysis is a description of its perceptive features obtained in the contextual usage of words which denote these concepts and by means of linguistic associative experiment and interviews with informants. We can analyze the context in which we find diagnostic combinations of the words naming the concepts we study. The combination is regarded as diagnostic if it reveals the information about the meaning development. For example:

\[(5) \quad A \text{ New Russian calls his friend, another New Russian:} \]
\[\text{ - Hi! How are you?} \]
\[\text{ - Hi! I’ll call you later, I am at the cemetery now.} \]
\[\text{ - Oh, no! Who killed you?} \]

In this context we can see that a man has a nonsense picture of the world: he thinks he speaks with his dead friend which is absurd, but he takes it for the matter of fact that now and then his friends are shot. The only question is who was the killer. Thus we come to a conclusion that everyday life of a New Russian includes a possibility of being suddenly killed. This is a concrete variant of the feature “behaving like criminals.”

A hyperbole is a common stylistic device in anekdots. In the series of jokes about New Russians the idea of their extravagant wealth is often expressed with a hyperbole:

\[(6) \quad \text{Two New Russians speak about their apartments.} \]
\[\text{ Do you remember my apartment?} \]
\[\text{ Sure.} \]
\[\text{ I’ve recently had rails laid and now I have a streetcar running.} \]
\[\text{ Great!} \]
\[\text{ Yes, but when I hurry to the bathroom, I have to take a taxi all the same.} \]
The apartment is so large that one needs a streetcar to traverse it, yet this still does not help in an emergency. It is necessary to mention that majority of urban Russians reside in blocks of apartments, and thus a common apartment which is usually rather small is presented as a big field, too big for a man to live there. Actually wealthy people in modern Russia often have their houses in the suburbs. In this anekdot we can see concrete variants of features “very rich” and “extravagantly wasting money.”

The procedure of associative experiment consists in obtaining an immediate reaction to a stimulus. The stimulus “New Russian” has brought about such typical reactions as “a businessman,” “a rich man,” “a crimson jacket,” “a golden chain,” “a big wallet.” These reactions exemplify the ideas of typical activity or appearance of the character described.

An interview with informants addressed with a request to help collecting data in my paper was the next step of the project. In formal interviews, the respondents were asked to finish the sentence: “When I think about a New Russian the following pictures or situations come to my mind….” Typical completions of the sentence given were these: “people sitting in a rich restaurant,” “Mercedes 600 colliding with a poor car,” “the beach at the Canaries,” “business negotiations.” It is interesting to note that mostly people think of New Russian’s leisure time and not of his main occupation.

The third dimension of a concept analysis is a description of values which determine the attitude of people to the concept. The values are revealed by means of explanatory transformations which make it possible to show modus and dictum of a sentence with an explicit expression of evaluation: “It is good / bad that X” or “One should do / should not do X.” To find out the evaluation we analyze texts and address the informants with a request to express their reactions.

(7) A New Russian is buying a apartment and asks a question:
- Is sound proofing here good?
  - Yes, very good. When the former owner was shot, nobody could hear it.

We can see that New Russians always run a risk of being killed. Thus the value contained in the anekdot may be expressed in the following way: Though being rich is good rich people can easily lose their lives, and hence one should not try to become too rich. Similar conclusions are reached by Francis Hsu [1969].

The informants were also asked to finish the sentences according to the technique used by Olga Leontovich [2005]:

A typical New Russian always ... knows what he wants, knows how to earn money, is ready to earn money, behaves in an impertinent way, goes to church.
A typical New Russian never ... pays taxes, thinks about means to achieve his aims, does what he does not want to do, respects other people, helps the poor.
The responses show that New Russians in stereotypes of my contemporaries have a strong character and can support themselves, which is good, but have neither moral norms, nor respect to law or other people, which is bad. They are regular church goers which is rather strange for many people to understand, but some informants think that New Russians try to make a bargain with God to be granted forgiveness for their sins.

The very fact of emergence of New Russians was to a great degree shocking for many people in Russia who grew up in the Soviet Union and who were disgusted by the idea of economic inequality. The initial shock turned into the feeling of tragedy as soon as many people found themselves on the brink of pauperization. And New Russians in this respect were considered the embodiment of the evil under the sun.

**NEW RUSSIANS IN ANEKDOTS: FABULOUSLY RICH**

Material wealth is the most evident feature of New Russians. The majority of jokes analyzed belong to this topic. It is necessary to mention that wealth as such is not an object of ridicule. The humorous effect is often determined by the desire of the newly rich to show off:

(8) _A New Russian has broken his arm and comes to a surgeon._

_Surgeon: You have a fracture and need a plaster cast._

_New Russian: Why plaster? Use marble — I will pay!_

Gypsum which is used for plaster is considered by a nouveau riche not prestigious enough, thus he is ready to buy the commodity of a higher value irrespective of its functional use. This anecdote is interesting as an example of values distortion in behavior of New Russians from the point of view of most people.

Rich people lose the sense of reality in anecdotes:

(9) _A New Russian fell in love with a girl who was passing by his office every day. He wanted to get acquainted with this girl and sought the advice of a psychologist._

_The best way to win the attention of the girl, the psychologist said, is to be as natural as possible, for example, to ask her a common question. Next day the New Russian noticed the girl, ran into the street, blocked her way, took off his gold Swiss wrist-watch and smashed it on the pavement._

_- Excuse me, can you tell me what’s the time? My watch is broken._

It is well known that love may sometimes make people behave in a strange way, but the point in this joke is the idea of being natural. This anecdote is a contemporary version of older anecdotes about the bizarre activities of Russian merchants. When drunk, they sometimes used banknotes as fuel for stoves or took bath filled with champagne. Despite the
fact that behavior of this businessman seems ridiculous one can trace some hidden admiration for his action, the admiration mixed with envy.

The humorous effect sometimes consists in the unexpected revelations of wealth:

(10) A boy comes home from school later than usual and very sad. His father asks him what has happened.
- Well, Dad, you have always told me to tell the truth.
- Yes, my son, that's what I do and I advise you to do it as well.
- You know, I wanted to see my class-mate Tanya home after school. She asked me if I had a crimson jacket, and I said no, and then she wanted to know if we had a Mercedes and a two-story country house, and again I said no. I was honest and she went with another boy who had a leather jacket, and I was standing and crying.
- My son, you were quite right, and you behaved well, but you are a man and you should not cry. Well, if you like you may ask our butler for a crimson jacket, and you may sell your old Rolls-Royce which I gave you as your first birthday present and buy this Mercedes, but your girl's whim is no reason for me to demolish our house and make it two stories lower!

In this narrative we can see that the man is extremely rich, because his servant wears that symbolic crimson jacket, his son owns a car more expensive than Mercedes, and finally they have a big mansion. This is a vivid example of defeated expectancy. Similar plots are often used in fiction, e.g. by O. Henry. I would like to emphasize here the admiration people feel for fabulous wealth. This anecdote shows that contempt for material well-being is not so widespread in Russian mentality as is sometimes believed.

In the anecdotes analyzed I found one example of how revelations of great wealth can humiliate people:

(11) A New Russian is having his luxurious car inspected. An inspector notices a strange red button inside.
Inspector: And what is this for?
New Russian: Well, it's for the rain. Press it, and...
Inspector: I see, and the top is raised.
New Russian (smiling): No. Press it, and the rain stops.

This anecdote shows rich people as gods who can rule everything, even the weather. As utter nonsense it makes people smile, but if one looks more attentively at its meaning one can say that a landslide in Russian attitude to wealth is taking place today, though such jokes are not numerous. A colleague of mine, however, proposed another interpretation of this anecdote: let's assume that a speaker associates himself with this New Russian, and if so the
whole picture seems not so bad, because each of us could become the owner of this magic car. In a way, it is self-respect expressed in a paradoxical mode.

New Russians look very funny when they appear in the world like common people:

(12) A cool foreign resort. World famous mud baths. A New Russian walks by and shouts: A miracle! A miracle happened! I am walking again!
   Another New Russian runs up to him and asks: “Have you recovered?”
   - No, my jeep was stolen.

These people are shown in anecdotes as not quite human beings. They become parts of their cars. This joke has an allusion to biblical texts, and the humorous effect is the burlesque nature of the revelation: a New Russian must lose his car to feel that he is human again.

New Russians live their own lives in which there is no recognition of the everyday lives of common people:

(13) - How can we definitely recognize a New Russian’s child with one question?
   - He does not know that there is Underground in Moscow.

Of course, the famous Moscow underground (Metro) is well-known to everyone in Russia. A similar story was told people about an old Russian aristocrat who said he had never taken water in his mouth. When asked what he washed his mouth with after cleaning his teeth he casually referred to some expensive wine.

New Russians live in an upside down world. Normal people try to buy things at a lower price, but nouveau riches boast of wasting money:

(14) Two New Russians are talking:
   - You know, I bought a new tie yesterday for $ 3500.
   - They have cheated you! You could have bought the same tie round the corner not far from my place for $ 5000.

We can see that the newly rich intentionally try to be different from common people in everything irrespective of any reason. It is their semiotic marker and they seem to notice nothing else.

New Russians sometimes may feel people are annoyed by their bizarre behavior, so then they make clumsy excuses:

(15) A New Russian leaves the Hermitage:
   - Well, a poor place...
   People around are indignant at him, so he says:
   - But it is very clean!
One must bear in mind that the Hermitage museum is located in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, the residence of Russian tsars. In the original text the diminutive suffixes are used with adjectives (‘bednenko, zato chistenko’). These suffixes express humiliation in this context, even though the same phrase is often used ironically to show that a place is extravagantly luxurious.

New Russians in anekdots can buy anything:

(16) The son of a New Russian calls his father:
- Dad, please buy our university, I am not allowed to take the exams.

A similar type of anekdot was well known in the Soviet Union:

A grandmother from Georgia writes a letter to her grandson who is a student in Moscow: “I have learned that you often take a taxi not to be late for your classes. It is not proper. I am sending you some money, please buy a streetcar and go to university by streetcar like everyone else.”

The Georgians were considered very rich and this exaggeration is a typical example of it. In this way a New Russian is simply one example of different images of an extremely rich person.

In the series of anekdots about New Russians we can also find jokes that openly express protest against them:

(17) A new Russian brought his son to the zoo and then came to the director of the zoo.
- How much is your zoo? I’d like to buy it for my son.
- I have a better idea. How much is your son? I’d like to buy him for my zoo.

Thus, some may view New Russians as something less than human, something to be put on display in the zoo.

New Russians in some anekdots are so rich that even heaven is worse than their life on the earth:

(18) A New Russian dies and is met by the Apostle Peter at the gates of the Paradise.
- Hello, Sidor Nikanorovich! (checking his notes). Well, you have villas in Hawaii and the Canaries?
- Yes.
- Well… Apartments in London, New York and Paris?
- Yes.
- A apartment in Moscow and the country house at Roublevka?
- Yes. I had all of this. I worked hard all my life and I paid taxes, by the way.
- Rolls-Royce, Porsche, two Ferraris?
- Yes, I had all that. But why do you ask? May I enter?
- Yes, you may, but I am afraid you will not like it here.

The symbols of wealth are enumerated in the text. These are apartments in the world capitals, a prestigious country house in a Moscow elite suburb and very expensive cars. Furthermore, the name of the New Russian in his anekdot alludes to familiar names of 19th century Moscow merchants.

A sarcastic attitude to New Russians is vividly seen in the following joke:

(19) *A new Vichy skin care product for New Russians “Muzzle anticrack.”*

The idea is that rich people eat too much and thus have very broad faces which can crack or burst like bubbles.

In summary, New Russians in anekdots are typically portrayed as wealthy beyond reason, a fact about them which may be considered bizarre, or wonderful, or simply mean.

**NEW RUSSIANS IN ANEKDOTS: STRIKINGLY PRIMITIVE**

New Russians appeared to have emerged from nowhere and, thus, they are often regarded as very primitive creatures who are absolutely illiterate. They came into the world as if from the jungle:

(20) *A new Russian asks his friend:*
- Hey, who are those guys Bach and Beethoven?
- Why, man, they write music for our mobile phones.

The newly rich seem to know nothing about world culture.

As a result, they may suffer for their ignorance:

(21) *Two New Russians are talking:*
- You know, Seryoga was slapped with a heavy fine in St. Petersburg. He was drunk and rammed into a guy on a horse.
- Really? Poor man. How is he?
- What could he be — his Mercedes totaled and he is lying in hospital.
- And the guy on a horse?
- The guy is Ok; he’s made of bronze.

The reference here is to a famous statue of tsar Peter I, which is a symbol of the city. In Russian the phrase “muzhik s loshadyu” — “a guy on a horse” — is colloquial and provincial, a way of describing a peasant in a village.
The world of New Russians is limited to their everyday kitchen existence though they can travel worldwide.

(22) A New Russians comes home from France. His wife asks him:
   - Well, tell me, what have you seen in Paris?
   - Nothing interesting... No, there was one thing. Do you remember the picture we saw in Vaska's kitchen? A woman “Gioconda.” Now it hangs in the Louvre.

The New Russians cannot understand the value of things, the world masterpiece for them is the same as a cheap copy to decorate a kitchen.
Sometimes fabulous wealth is combined with striking illiteracy.

(23) A New Russian comes to the government and says:
   - How much is the Baikonur cosmodrome [satellite launch site]? I’d like to buy it.
   He receives a polite answer:
   - You know, the Baikonur is in Kazakhstan.
   A then comes the question:
   - And how much is Kazakhstan?

The newly rich are sure they can buy even independent countries.
The manners and ways of New Russians are strange and inexplicable for common people.

(24) A New Russian tells a waiter at the restaurant:
   - Five bottles of vodka and one salad.
   A waiter:
   - May I ask you a question? You always order a salad and never eat it. Why?
   - Because I need something soft to fall into!

We can imagine a picture of a very drunk man with his face on the plate.
New Russians are not only illiterate or wild in their behavior, but also very cruel:

(25) A New Russian is asking a cuckoo how long he has to live. The bird says:
   - A lot, a lot, only set my throat free!

According to a Russian tradition, a cuckoo may tell a person the number of years he has to live. Here the man has the cuckoo by the throat and is asking it this question. It is an interesting case of dealing with fate. Such behavior is seldom practiced in Russian folklore. Some may see the New Russian as the embodiment of fate itself.
(26) A New Russian comes to a furniture shop and says:
- I want bread.
- No bread here. We sell furniture. Do you like this wardrobe?
- I need no wardrobe, I want bread.
- Sorry, no bread here.
The New Russian gets angry and gives the shop assistant a hard blow on his face.
This happens again on the second day.
On the third day a New Russian comes into the shop again, and the assistant with
- trembling hands puts some bread on the bar:
- This is special for you, very-very fresh...
- No, man, I have bought my bread at a drug store. Now I want some sour cream.

It is impossible to foresee or change the fate, and the New Russian enjoys his absolute
power over people. It is interesting to mention that similar anekdots are told about Stalin or
the KGB which are always enigmatic.

But occasionally New Russians demonstrate their fear.

(27) A “Volga” car rams into the back of a “Mercedes.” A New Russian takes out a
- baseball bat, walks over to the “Volga” and begins to beat on it. Suddenly he
- notices a militia general inside and says:
- I am sorry, I am knocking to get your attention, so that I can give you money for
  this accident.

This is an overcompensation people feel when they think that a beast of prey may be
one day caught by a mightier beast.

New Russians in anekdots are primitive in the sense that they are very illiterate and
cruel, they are regarded as savages and sometimes are taken as personification of fate. Their
notorious barbarism was viewed as shocking and tragic by Russian intelligentsia, and jokes
about this new breed of people to some extent helped intellectuals accept the new reality.

NEW RUSSIANS IN ANEKDOTS: DESPERATELY UNHAPPY

New Russians in anekdots are mostly shown as strange and brutal creatures, but
somehow one can feel sorry for them, because they are really not loved and are not capable
of living like human beings. There are various jokes about their families:

(28) A woman in tears runs to the police station:
- Find my husband, I can’t live without him!
- When did he disappear?
- Ten days ago.
- Why are you speaking about it only now?
- I've run out of money!

The woman needs not her husband, but his money.
Life means very little for New Russians. They can never be safe when dealing with
each other. Very often their financial problems are solved with a gun.

(29) The TV show “What? Where? When?” is on. The presenter says:
- Dear experts, a question from a New Russian.
  A New Russian:
- Dear experts, my name is Vovan. A couple of months ago my buddy Kolyan
  borrowed $1000 from me and did not give the money back. A month ago he
  borrowed from me $2500 and did not give me the money back. A week ago he
  borrowed $5000 and did not give me my money back. Now, please, listen to my
  question: Who is lying there in the black box?

This interactive show is popular in Russia. Anyone can ask experts a question, and if
experts fail to answer it the person who asked the question is given some money as a prize.
The answer to this question is obvious: it is the man killed by his friend for not paying his
debt. The characters have typical names New Russians bear — Vovan and Kolyan (variants
of Vova and Kolya, diminutives of Vladimir and Nikolay).

There is a certain code of honor between New Russians, and it is actually a set of
norms between criminals. For instance, one should fulfill the request of a friend:

(30) A New Russian helped his friend, a racketeer. The Racketeer says:
- Well, buddy, ask me whatever you wish.
- I don’t know... I have everything. The only thing I would like to have is to get
  buried in Red Square...
  The Racketeer takes out his, shoots his friend and tells his security men:
- Boys, bury my friend where he wanted to be buried.

The Red Square is the central place in Moscow in front of the Kremlin. Leaders of
Soviet Russia are buried by the Kremlin wall. The request is fulfilled, and the reputation of
a racketeer is safe.

New Russians in anekdots have no real families, they don’t care for their wives:

(31) The office of a New Russian is blown up. There are firemen working, a lot of militia
men around, smoke billowing from the windows. A New Russian enters the
building and sees his security man badly wounded who says:
- Boss, I am sorry, when it blew up your wife was in here, she is dead...
- To hell with her, I need my book-keeper, where is my book-keeper?

A book-keeper is much more important to the businessman than his wife.
Children of New Russians have no warm feelings for their parents:

(32) A wife of a New Russian comes to see her husband in jail and says:
- You know, kids have started asking questions.
- Where Daddy is?
- No, where he has hidden the stolen money!

New Russians run a great risk of imprisonment, and general public opinion approves of severe punishments for rich people. The traditional attitude to great wealth in Russia is definitely negative: one cannot become rich and remain honest.

New Russians are preoccupied only with their property:

(33) A nouveau riche is having dinner at home. His son comes in:
- Dad, this is Lena, my girl-friend.
- Well, my son, if you want to marry her, do it, but if you have in mind to take my jeep for a ride, it won’t go!

We can see that a car means much more for a New Russian than his children happiness. And their children quickly learn how to make use of their parents’ worship of money:

(34) The son of a New Russian comes home and says:
- Dad, do you remember you promised me $1000 if I pass my exams?
- Yes, I remember.
- You can be glad: I have saved you such great money!

The boy understands that his failure must be shown as money saving.
There is no such a thing as objective facts for New Russians:

(35) A New Russian is talking with his doctor:
- Well, doc, make your decision on my diagnosis: either I will live or you won’t.

The idea that a diagnosis may be bought is not a new one:

Two Georgians are sitting at a restaurant.
- Givi, why don’t you drink wine?
- Gogi, my doctor does not allow me.
- What rubbish! I have ulcer and my doctor has forbidden me to drink wine. Well, I gave him some money, and he said: Drink and be happy!

Long before the appearance of New Russians, Georgians played the traditional part of wealthiness beyond reason.

The life of New Russians’ wives is also reflected in anecdotes. They are not to be envied:

(36) A wife of a New Russian is complaining:
- You know, I asked my husband for $200 to go to a beauty salon, he looked at me and gave me $500, bastard!

The woman can see that her husband thinks she is ugly.

Wives of New Russians regard each other as rivals:

(37) The door bell to the house of a New Russian rings. His wife opens the door and sees a representative of a famous firm.
- My dear lady, may I offer you the catalog of our latest products, which, as you neighbor told me, you cannot afford to buy?

The worst thing a New Russian’s wife can face is being unable to keep up with her neighbor.

New Russians live in a distorted world which revolves around money. This distortion is reflected in anecdotes aimed at ridiculing patent absurdities:

(38) A prison.
- Hey, what did you get your sentence for?
- For a bribe.
- Really? Have you tried to get your sentence for free?

A bribe is understood here not as a crime but as a common means to solve problems. New Russians can survive only by bribing bureaucracy:

(39) A New Russian is trying to book a flight. He gives his passport to a cashier with 1000 roubles enclosed:
- One to Moscow, please!
- The flight is sold out.
- I badly need it! (He adds 1000 roubles).
The cashier picks up the telephone.
- Please, connect me to the Regional Prosecutor.
The businessman thinks that he is lost and will be taken to prison, but hears the following:
- Comrade Region Prosecutor, this is the airline terminal. Your flight reservation has been canceled. You are flying tomorrow.

Even state authorities can be manipulated by clerks who have access to commodities in short supply. In such cases public opinion always supports those who are oppressed by the bureaucracy, including the New Russians.

The idea that rich people will be finally punished for their dishonest actions is very close to the hearts of those who are not well off. The Almighty God is not to be outwitted by the nouveau riche:

(40) A New Russian is praying:
- My Lord, what is a million years for you?
- A moment!
- And what is a million dollars for you?
- A penny!
- Well, give me this penny as a present!
- Ok, just wait for a moment.

The story teller makes it certain that money cannot buy everything.

Anekdots about New Russians often express the idea that the rich have to pay a very high price to enjoy their life, and it may happen so that they are really unhappy:

(41) A New Russian is complaining to his friend:
Yesterday I bought a box of Christmas toys and all of them are false.
- Really? Are they broken?
- No.
- Poorly painted?
- No.
- Well?
- They do not bring me joy.

People try to prove that rich men lose something we all have.

New Russians are often portrayed in anekdots as unhappy because they are not loved in their families, they cannot love anything except money, they constantly risk their lives, and they live in a distorted and absurd world of their fancy. Such an attitude to New Russians signals the self-respect common people feel when they mock the absurdity of life, which then serves to promote the revival of social optimism.
CONCLUSION

Anekdots about New Russians illustrate dominant attitudes people share in modern Russia towards wealth, social inequality, justice and fate. The newly rich suddenly appeared on a public stage, became an extravagant minority and immediately became the object of ridicule in anekdots. Anekdots about New Russians vary along a continuum, at one end of which is total hatred for them and, at the other end, covert self-identification with them. Basically, these people are shown in anekdots as fabulously rich, strikingly primitive and desperately unhappy. These basic images reflect specific attitudes towards the nouveau riches as developed in the minds of different social groups in Russia.

The genre of anekdots is shaped by the function of such jokes, and the function is to express more or less mild criticism towards something which is both unpleasant and yet bearable. Anekdots about the rich are told by the poor. It is not by chance that there are no jokes that rich people tell about the poor. It means that psychologically anekdots about the New Russians are a form of self-defense of people who are not winners.

One can easily trace the roots of critical attitude to rich people in Russian mentality. Similar jokes were told in the Soviet Union about Georgians who were considered to be extremely rich and a clearly segregated social group. It is not relevant for an anecdotal picture of the world that not only Georgians could be rich. However, there is a big difference between portrayals of rich Georgians and New Russians: the former is very impulsive and preoccupied with sex, whereas the latter is quite illiterate and half-criminal. Thus the idea of a close connection between crime and big money was intensified in anekdots, which reflected a period of mass impoverishment for the Russians, especially for the elderly. Thus, the bitter flavor of many jokes about great wealth has a very definite connection to age and to the elderly.

Young people differ in their attitude to the rich from their grandparents. Anekdots of this type express admiration and sometimes envy. It is here that we find hidden self-identification of a story teller and his object. New Russians are predominantly young, they behave naturally, they can be boastful and they enjoy taking risk. To describe them a hyperbole is often used. This type of anekdots is not as vividly anti-plutocratic as it is often assumed when speaking about the general attitude to wealth in Russian mentality.

Anekdots about New Russians reflect the protest of the intelligentsia, a large and broad-based social group of intellectuals who have always positioned themselves as the true elite of society. These people have always been poor, well educated and morally uncompromising. The picture of New Russians as illiterate Tarzans shows us the frustration the intelligentsia felt when they realized that after the communist bureaucracy collapse there emerged a new formation which was to some degree even uglier than the previous regime. New Russians are shown in anekdots not only as primitive, but also as very cruel and dangerous savages.
The conventional triangle of attitudes to New Russians I have tried to construe and describe may be expressed in the ideas of Shock, Tragedy, and Revival. People are shocked by fantastic wealth of nouveau riches, deeply offended by their savage modes of life, but finally come to an optimistic conclusion that New Russians should be pitied as they lack most important things in life — love, understanding, peace of mind and security. Thus general public, at first positioned as losers, turn out to be winners, and New Russians seem not to be objects of envy but are taken as funny fools. Now the social type of a New Russian has almost completely disappeared from the modern Russian scenery and new types will emerge soon. Characters in anekdotes live their own lives and however whimsical they may be this life is a valid source of study for Linguistic Anthropology and Communication Theory.

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BOOK REVIEWS


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Uncensored? Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia sets out to survey a potentially wide-ranging field of satiric and humorous forms as they have developed over the last two decades. And, indeed, where this collection succeeds is in offering the reader a taste of many different forms of Russian cultural expression that contain humorous, ironic, or satiric elements. The individual essays offer interesting glimpses into a variety of different forms or studies of particular artists. Where it is lacking, however, is in providing any sort of narrative with which to pull these contributions together, leaving readers without real conclusions about the direction or impact of these forms.

While the collection bills itself as a study of post-Soviet humor in particular, there are a substantial number of essays that focus on an individual writer’s or filmmaker’s career, spanning both Soviet and post-Soviet periods, but often including more significant output in the Soviet era. These selections tend to adeptly explore the psychology and biography of the artist in question across time, though several reach a similar conclusion as Karen Ryan, who writes of author Vladimir Voinovich that “the Soviet regime has been and continues to be (in retrospect) Voinovich’s primary antagonist. He is still at his best when he is mocking and exposing Soviet culture” (26). In the pieces on Voinovich, Evgeny Popov and Iurii Mamin alike, we are left with the picture of an artist who has built a career around the realities of Soviet life and who is subsequently struggling to grapple with his changing milieu. While it would be interesting to explore why these old masters are faltering and what art forms are succeeding in their stead, the editors, Olga Mesropova and Seth Graham, do not offer much in the way of contextualizing analysis. The individual writers, too, take a fairly narrow scope. Ryan, for instance, concludes that “readers should follow the twilight of [Voinovich’s] career with great interest, for it should tell us much about the viability of Russian satire in the new order” (26). However, it seems unlikely that the fate of Russian satire can be judged on the career of just one author (who honed his skill in a very particular
context), and far more likely that newer forms, genres, techniques, and practitioners will rise up to take his place. But we are left to fill in these gaps ourselves.

Likewise, there are several recurring threads amongst many of the individual essays that are begging for some discussion and analysis. For instance, a number of the authors comment on there being a virulently misogynist strain in the humor of the medium they examine (in everything from the satire of Evgeny Popov, to komiks, to anekdot, to Russian rock). None of the writers spend much time attempting to explain this phenomenon, while Anthony Qualin, in an otherwise interesting article, unsatisfactorily seems to lump the misogyny of post-Soviet rock music in with all other use of vulgarities and even with a joyous, Bakhtinian form of carnival irreverence. Ultimately, given the omnipresence of this theme, it is something that seems ripe for comment and contextualization by the editors of the volume.

One of the issues here seems to stem from the organization of the collection. The thirteen case study essays are grouped roughly according to medium, which is certainly understandable but does not necessarily tell us much. Instead, had the contributions been organized thematically, there might be more productive comparisons drawn.

Within the wider theoretical literature on satire right now, much of the more interesting work is focused on the contemporary outpouring of irony and satire (particularly in North America) used as a method for critiquing the inadequacies of the public political debate and of actively intervening in re-framing the terms of debate (Gray et al, 2009; Jones, 2004; Baym, 2009; Baumgartner, 2007; Duncombe, 2007). What seems missing in this volume is an explicit analysis of how the varied forms of humor and satire are linked to the political or to larger conversations taking place within public and counterpublic spheres. Some of the contributors seem to hint that much post-Soviet humor is somewhat conservative in function in that it often seems to lack a critical edge. If this is the case, however, it should be explicitly explored and thematized as such.

The one essay that does undertake this type of analysis itself, Alexander Kozintsev’s piece on the television show Kukly, offers a study of the popular puppet-based spoof of Russian politics (as it existed before its prominent writers were forced out by political pressure), but it errs in attempting to come to broad conclusions about the genre of satire in general rather than its iteration in contemporary Russian television. Kozintsev ultimately argues that satire never succeeds in its more serious or tendentious aims, as the signal that “this is play” places comedy outside reality, meaning that humor “defuses even a satire that, at first glance, is extremely hostile, and in the process makes the satire timeless rather than topical, conciliatory rather than subversive” (191). Though he posits this thesis as a novel one, it is fairly consistent with long-standing assumptions about satire within literary theory (as well as with oft-cited common wisdom) that satire has no real political effect, functioning more as a “safety-valve” to pleasurable alleviate frustration. He does not, however, consider any of the contemporary scholarship on satire that distinguishes between the majority of
political humor that goes after the personalities and foibles of particular public figures (never calling the system itself into question) versus examples of true satire (which may or may not be all that funny) that critique policy and social wisdom (Peterson, 2008; Gray et al, 2008). This contemporary scholarship points to a mushrooming field of hybrid satirical forms now developing in several countries to engage us as audience members interested in entertainment and as citizens looking for meaningful engagement with public life. Kozintsev may well be right about the overall effect of this particular program, but to make the case based on a dismissal of all satire (presumably in all media in all contexts) is only to weaken his argument and works against furthering our understanding of the specificity of post-Soviet media in particular.

Finally, for a collection focused on post-Soviet humor and satire as a whole, of the material that is truly centered on this period (as opposed to both pre and post), the majority of it is heavily weighted on the 1990s. In an engaging piece on the popular detective series Streets of Broken Lights, Elena Baraban discusses the way in which the ironic humor of the main characters in the early years of the program worked to rehabilitate the image of police officers within Russia. She spends just one paragraph, however, on a passing mention of how the show changed in a radical way in 2004 as it was altered “to accommodate the more conservative values of Putin’s Russia” (146). Though providing more analysis of this phenomenon might not have been within the scope of that one essay, it certainly is within the scope of the collection. In Seth Graham’s Afterword, he does posit that we may now be in the second “‘post-Soviet’ (or perhaps post-post-Soviet) period,” (225) pointing to the resurgent autocratic tendencies of Vladimir Putin’s government as ushering in these changes, but the short piece does not go very far toward evaluating this phenomenon. Ultimately, the volume as a whole contains some interesting material, but leaves much territory unexplored and many questions about the state of post-Soviet humor unanswered.

REFERENCES


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In 1928 Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp published *Morphology of the Folktale* (Morfologiya Skazki), a seminal work in formal narrative analysis that had a decided influence on the development of narratology, structural semantics, semiology and folklore studies around the world. Morphology of the Folktale represents one of the earliest and most influential applications of principles of structural linguistics to the analysis of a specific genre.

Almost fifty years after the first publication of Morphology of the Folktale and six years following Propp’s death, *On the Comic and Laughter* (Problemy Komizma I Smekha) was published in Leningrad in 1976. As we learn from the translators and editors of this first English-language edition, *On the Comic and Laughter* has been translated so far into Serbian, Italian and Chinese. Given the resurgence of interest in the comic, humor and laughter in recent years and the importance of Propp’s earliest contributions to the formal analysis of genre, it is safe to assume that *On the Comic and Laughter* will see a far wider distribution in the near future.

Those familiar with Propp’s Morphology may be most interested in reading his last published work for what it reveals about changes in his thinking about theory, method, structure and the meaning of genre in the later years of his scholarly career. In particular, *On the Comic and Laughter* is critical of strict formalism, hypothetico-deductive models and autonomous theories of language and literature in ways that suggest an interest in reconciling Formalism with Marxism in literary criticism. In marked contrast to Morphology, this work calls into question the assumption of a transcendent aesthetics of form and expression abstracted from the specificities of everyday life. Thus, the works of Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev are all manifest, if largely implicit, influences in a book that resonates with faint echoes of Trotsky’s well-known positive critique of formalism in Literature and Revolution.

Propp’s cognitive orientation to the comic and to laughter is thoroughly informed by the classic “incongruity” theories of humor prefigured in Aristotle’s philosophy and subsequently developed by Kant, Schopenhauer and Bergson. However, Propp’s adherence to empirical, inductivist principles of analysis drive him to seek what “incongruity” theories do not account for: the diversity of expressive, behavioral responses to the comic, especially laughter.
The key to the answer, according to Propp, follows from the empirical evidence that “ridicule” and “ridiculing laughter” are the most common, prevalent forms of “comic-laughter.” (p. 12) From this inductivist claim, Propp proposes that “ridicule” is the “genus of the comic,” to which all other forms of “comic” are subordinated as species and varieties. In the final analysis, it is this assumption of the primacy of “ridicule” that leads Propp to see virtually all examples of the “comic” and all instances of “laughter” as based on the perception of “flaws” in the self, others, objects and situations.

The book is divided into 27 very short chapters, most of them so abbreviated, in fact, that much of the development of Propp’s argument takes on the character of that style of exposition by analogy and “family resemblance” so effectively employed by Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations. Thus, having argued from several different perspectives that “incongruity” and the sudden, unexpected revelation of “flaws” are essential to “comic effect” and laughter, Propp then devotes fewer than four pages to a discussion of “Parody” as one illustration of the centrality of incongruity to our understanding of the comic and laughter (pp. 60-63).

This brief chapter on parody is followed by an equally short chapter outlining caricature, hyperbole and the grotesque as specific forms of “Comic Exaggeration” exemplifying “incongruity” through the revelation of “flaws” in a specific character or object (pp. 64-68). Subsequent chapters -- “Foiled Plans” (pp. 69-74), “Duping” (pp. 75-80), “Incongruity” (pp. 81-87) and “Lying” (pp. 88-91) — extend the analysis by broadening the scope of “incongruity” to include plots, situations and social actions. Laughter itself, in the final analysis, represents different expressive responses to diverse perspectives on “incongruity,” as outlined briefly in six of the book’s final chapters (pp. 105-136).

Propp’s strategic vision of a grand theory of the comic and laughter combined with his inductivist, empirical methodology raises a number of questions about the key terms that frame the entire study -- the presumed primacy of ridicule in the general analysis of the comic and the epistemological, moral and cultural status of the notion “flaw.” One indication of the type of problem that arises in the course of Propp’s analytic work is the status of “laughter” that cannot be analyzed in these terms. “Benign laughter” (pp. 119-125) and “Joyful laughter” (pp. 129-130) fall into this category.

“Benign laughter,” as Propp recognizes, poses a problem for any analysis based on “ridicule,” so Propp resolves this with a symmetrical, but rather unconvincing formal inversion. If “ridicule laughter” follows from the viewer’s recognition that apparently positive “external characteristics” reveal “inner flaws,” then “benign laughter” must follow from the viewer’s recognition that “external flaws” reveal “positive inner features.” In this way, Propp proposes, “benign laughter” actually occupies a “transitional, intermediate” position between: “types of laughter that are caused by flaws and lead to ridicule and those not caused by flaws containing no ridicule.” (p. 125). In fact, Propp identifies at least one type of laughter that escapes his analytical framework completely, for “joyful laughter” is
precisely that type of laughter that cannot be explained at all by Propp’s framework. His solution to the problem is to declare “joyful laughter” a “psychological problem,” rather than an “aesthetic problem” with clear social ramifications (p. 129-130).

Quite apart from the rather serious questions this raises about the radical, and not clearly motivated separation of the “social” from the “psychological” in Propp’s approach to the comic and laughter, we might very well question the primacy of these key terms for the analysis of other forms of the comic. If certain types of “laughter” cannot be explained in terms of Propp’s key terms of analysis, might it not be the case that any analysis presupposing “ridicule” and “flaws” actually masks the aesthetic, social functions of some forms of the comic? Might we not want to reconsider, for example, the very basis for comparing Gogol’s satire, so clearly grounded in ridicule and flaws, with Chekhov’s comic, so clearly inflected with empathy, compassion and a humanist “joy”?

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties inherent in Propp’s wide-ranging project, On the Comic and Laughter stands as an important and suggestive exploration of the diverse forms, functions and effects of the comic in literature and in life. Ambitious in scope and sensitive to differences, this book is an evocative kaleidoscope of the comic. It will no doubt serve as a source of inspiration for many scholars working in different areas of humor and satire.

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