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MODERN RUSSIAN FOLK POETRY: AN OVERVIEW

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1. Introduction.

This lecture is based on my personal experience with russian folk culture, and on the collection of over 3000 observations made by Jana Kutin, Yakov Broido and me in 1949–1995, which will be published later this year.

It is often hard to distinguish between conventional literature and folk poetry. It seems appropriate thus to start with the

1.1. Definition. A piece of literature is said to belong to folk poetry if it

a) allows for transformations

b) is circulated privately

c) has an explicit structure.

Comments: Property a) defines folk poetry as a set of speech patterns, that is, as a part of spoken language.

Property b) refers to the lack of institutional support;

Explicit structure mentioned in c) is superimposed on conventional language structure and is recognized as such by all parties. Properties a) and b) refer to the word "folk"; property c) – to the word "poetry".

Consequence: A single piece of literature cannot be viewed as a part of folk poetry unless one is able to find its tranformation(s).

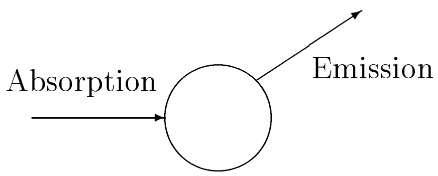
1.2. Example. "A spruce was born in the forest".

П13.02п $I3''$	P13.02p $I3''$	P13.02p
Москва, 1959	Moskva, 1959	Moscow, 1959
В лесу родилась ёлочка,	V lesu rodilas' ëlochka,	A spruce was born in the forest
В лесу она росла,	V lesu ona rosla,	It has been growing there
Зимой и летом стройная,	Zimoj i letom strojnaya,	In the winter and in the summer
Зелёная была	Zelënaya byla	It was slender and green.

П13.02 $I3''$	P13.02 $I3''$	P13.02
Таня, 11л	Tanya, 11l	Tanya, 11 (b.1984)
Сан Диего, 9 апр 1995	San Diego, 9 apr 1995	San Diego, 9 apr 1995
В лесу родилась ёлочка	V lesu rodilas' ëlochka	A spruce was born in the forest
Под ней лежал бандит,	Pod nej lezhal bandit,	A bandit lay underneath,
Потом пришла снегурочка	Potom prishla snegurochka	Then the snow maiden came
И принесла им динамит	I prinesla im dinamit	And brought them dynamite

Explanation. Aside from inspirations, and memories of the childhood, folk poems and songs are a bunch of very efficient mnemonics. Kids inserted "bandit" and "dynamite" in the vanilla song above for purely pragmatic reasons: knowing these two words may allow them to avoid potentially dangerous situations.

Folk poetry is created in multiple acts of absorption, transformation and emission:



Since each act includes transformation, the notions of authorship and priority do not apply to folk poetry, at least qualitatively. One should rather measure the amount of information brought in and thrown out by each speaker. Math routinely suggests to describe processes with many independent contributors in terms of continuous evolution. Yet even that may not be applied to the evolution of text, since some contributions may be quite large!

2. Sources, divisions and types of modern russian folk poetry.

2.1. Sources.

Period	**Professional**	**Non-professional**
XIX c.	Romance	Syllabotonic folk poetry
1910-1950	Popular music	Poets of prisons and labour camps
1920-1990	Official Soviet song	Anonymous poets and singers
1950-1995	Independent authors	General public

NOTE. Unlike its American counterpart, Russian folk poetry is 99% anonymous. Though texts whose author is known still qualify as folk poetry (see Def.1), omission of any reference to the originator is quite natural for the texts which undergo permanent change. Cf. a couplet originally due to Pushkin:

Товарищ, вѣрь – взойдёт она,	Believe, my comrade – it will rise
Звѣзда плѣнительного счастья	The star of fascinating fortune

which became incorporated into a soldier's poem (obs. S2.17, 1984):

Когда из списков этой части	When our names will disappear
Исчезнут наши имена.	From this detachment lists and files.

2.2. SOCIAL DIVISIONS. Classification of folk poems and songs can be based on the social environments they come from, or those in which they are retained long enough. Those listed below provide an ample source of folk literature.

Criminal	Common	Children	Student
Convict	Soldier	Teenager	Intelectual

NOTES. 1. One should keep in mind that assignment of a social environment to a poem may be (if not always is) dicy. All divisions of the society are interrelated, and enjoy a free exchange of texts, meters and tunes.

2. There are no such divisions as "lower middle-class" or "yard" song or "cruel romance" (cf. G. S. Smith, Songs To Seven strings, Indiana Univ., 1984); they are all referred to as "common" here. Gipsy songs (if any) also fall in this category.

3. Intellectual folk poetry includes folklore of tourists, geologists and hippies.

2.3. TYPES. There are six currently productive types.

Songs	Limericks I and II
Ballads	Proverbs
Poems	Correspondences

NOTES. 1. Limericks I are four-line poems in trochaic tetrameter/trimeter, mostly of erotic and satyric content. Limericks II are satyric studies of death and pain, often in (but not restricted to) dactilic tetrameter.

2. Proverbs are structured by repetition/variation, which makes them covered by Definition 1.1. The same applies to *correspondences*, a common entry of soldiers' and students' notebooks, containing lists of army or school terms "translated" to the titles of movies and books e.g. (obs. S5.25; cf. also T5.57, P9.01):

Патруль – три богатыря	Patrol – Three Knights
Уход от патруля – их знали только в лицо	Escaping a patrol – They were known only by face

2.4. ATTRACTIONS OF FOLK POETRY. Here is the list of subjects which attract the attention of folk poets and editors. There is no common denominator whatsoever to this list – just a collection of issues viewed as "hot":

Love	War	Machines
Freedom	Sex	Sea
Responsibility	Society	Odessa

In particular, Odessa is one single city which has inspired a lot of Russian folk poetry.

3. Reasons for the existence of the folk poetry.

Property	**Results in**	**Beneficiaries**
a) Speech patterns	Language database	Kids, *marginals*; intellectuals
b) Private circulation	Free medium	Closed societies
	Spontaneous behaviour	Convicts, soldiers; kids
c) Explicit structure	Supply of necessary *rhythms*	Body and emotions
	Intellectual pastime (meters)	Mind

NOTE. 1. Marginals (ossetians, kazakhs, moldavians, armenians) have proved to be an extremely rich source of genuine russian folk poetry. The reason is partly their need for easily memorized patterns; partly "filtering out" by the mainstream folk of all irrelevant pieces of literature.

2. Juniors (soldiers and students) are often maintaining records, which support their competence in language and poetry. This has also proved to be an invaluable source of information.

4. Conclusions.

Folk poetry thrives in social environments where learning or processing of language is a matter of everyday life. It is also highly demanded by those who lack freedom and/or intellectual stimulation.

Any regular study of folk poetry should be based on scanning socially defined groups like kids, youths, ethnic marginals, intellectuals, convicts and soldiers. This radically diverges with the practice of screening the senior part of the mainstream population, existing ever since the Kireevsky-Yazykov project (1828–). Therefore, it is not surprising that the existing body of russian folk poetry is so scarcely understood.