

Svetlana Adonyeva

## The Pragmatics of the *Chastushka*: A Socio-Linguistic Study

There exist two dominant, and mutually exclusive, interpretations of the origins of the *chastushka*.<sup>1</sup> According to the first, the *chastushka* is a recent genre of folklore, generated by the influence of industrial culture on the peasant milieu. D. K. Zelenin himself held this opinion: ‘The most fashionable and popular types of folk poetry among the people at the moment,’ he wrote in 1901, ‘are without doubt the romance and the *chastushka* [...] *Chastushki* have stopped being “factory poetry”, as they were christened by journalists and ethnographers when they first appeared; in remote villages, where there is no factory for hundreds of miles around, you’re certain to hear young people banging out a “hit” about sweethearts and girlfriends on the accordion, with “flourishes” [*perebory*] ad nauseam’ [Zelenin 1994: 27].

Zelenin considered the *chastushka* the product of an era of transition, deriving from the integration of the Russian people into the literary culture of the Russian intelligentsia. But there is also a diametrically opposed view of the *chastushka*’s origins: according to this, it is an abso-

Svetlana Adonyeva  
St Petersburg State University

<sup>1</sup> For a general survey of work on the *chastushka* see [Lazutin 1960] and [Bakhtin 1966: 8–52].

lutely traditional genre of folklore. [See Sobolevsky 1902: 299; Eleonskaya 1914; Florensky 1914;<sup>1</sup> Rosenfeld 1926; and, more recently, Banin, Burmistrov 1997, and many others.] One of the arguments used to support this latter view is that the *chastushka*, even after it had acquired an independent niche — outside spectacles or rituals — also circulated as a kind of choral accompaniment to folk dances, which themselves were certainly an ancient form. In his accounts of folk culture in mid-nineteenth-century Siberia, G. N. Potanin drew attention to the absence there of full-length songs to accompany dances, but also pointed out that song fragments very like the *chastushka* were used as accompaniments of this kind [Potanin 1894].

Whatever their attitude to the issue of the *chastushka*'s origins, all students of the genre have noted the highly specific relationship between the *chastushka* and its musical setting: the *chastushka* is just as often chanted, or declaimed, as it is sung [Banin, Burmistrov 1997]. Whether or not it is actually sung, it is marked out in terms of intonation and rhythm from ordinary speech. In the words of E. N. Eleonskaya, '*chastushki* can be sung without music, they "are spoken out", that is, articulated one after the other like a recitative; during a dance or as interruptions to a series of long songs, they will be "shouted out"' [Eleonskaya 1914: IX]. This point, noted by every collector of, and researcher on, the *chastushka*, is very important. It bears witness to the existence of a special stylistic register that the performer of the *chastushka* switches into when he or she is singing or speaking the *chastushka* text. The *chastushka* is marked out from the flood of spontaneous speech by rhythm, by intonation, by the register and timbre of the voice, by special forms of syntactic organisation and so on. In turn, the marking out of the language of the *chastushka* points to various fixed conventions determining this linguistic and behavioural tradition, conventions to which the performer appeals when he or she invokes the given register. And it is these conventions determining the composition and performance of the *chastushka* with which the present article is concerned.

## I

The relationship between the *chastushka* performer and the subject of the *chastushka* itself deserves special attention. D. K. Zelenin himself drew attention to this: 'In the *chastushka*, there is no gap between the performer and the content of the song itself. The genre is utterly individual in character [...] *Chastushka* singers either express their own emotional experiences and moods directly, or adopt extant texts that convey their world-view and feelings, or which can be adapted to do this' [Zelenin 1997: 492].

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<sup>1</sup> On the pre-revolutionary history of work on the *chastushka*, see also [Orlov 1954].

The understanding of the *chastushka* as a *show song*<sup>1</sup> set out by informants from the tradition obtaining in Belozerye (in the north of Vologda region), captures exactly this trait of the genre — the identification of the lyric subject and the performer of the *chastushka*. And one more characteristic of the *chastushka* is also related to its exemplary status.

The collector of *chastushki* V. I. Simakov, drawing attention to something that many others before and after him have also remarked, observed that: ‘the fragmentary, unfinished character of the *chastushka* is its main distinguishing feature [...] The *chastushka* expresses a single moment, a single ephemeral emotional experience’ [Simakov 1913: 11]. Evolving this idea, he made a statement of fundamental importance: the *chastushka* was never conceived as a song and should not be understood in those terms. Its function was, in his view, utterly different from that of the song: ‘I recall a striking comparison made to me by a man from the peasantry, who spoke of the *chastushka* as being like a newspaper: “You get all the city news from the papers,” he said, “and we get the village news from the *chastushka*’ [Simakov 1913: 13].

The *chastushka* is a conduit for news, then. Zelenin made the same point: ‘The modern *chastushka* [...] is endowed with the naked, authentic realism of journalism or newspaper gossip columns [...] And in addition, the *chastushka* always makes an effort to reflect the latest events in local political and social life’ [Zelenin 1999: 465].

Analysis of how the *chastushka* circulates among young people in Belozerye today prompts the same conclusion: they use it to pass news around. But in the framework of the *chastushka*’s performance setting (a dance or suchlike), the subject matter of the news announcements is reduced to a single subject: the popularity ratings within a given peer group. If we move on to *chastushki* performed outside this youth setting, we observe that the news-transmission function of the *chastushka* expands to a significant degree: the subject of the utterance can then be any event of local, district, or state importance: space travel, a pensions hike, fashionable skirt lengths, the state voucher issue,<sup>2</sup> the arrival of new officials locally, and so on.

The text of the *chastushka* itself does not have to be new: both a recently-composed *chastushka*, and an old one that happens to be à propos, can function as a ‘show song’. Recordings of the *chastushka* make clear the genre’s extraordinary mobility in geographical terms: one and the same text is attested from locations that are very

<sup>1</sup> Literally ‘exemplary song’ [*primernaya pesnya*]. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> I.e. the issuing to citizens of cashable vouchers in 1992 as a supposed equivalent for their stake in nationalised industry (part of the ‘shock therapy’ of marketisation propounded by Egor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais). [Editor].

long distances apart. And the texts of *chastushki* can display quite a high degree of stability, despite their often remarked ‘topicality’. This permits one to hypothesise that it is not so much a given text itself that is new, but its attachment to some concrete fact or other. Or, to put it more accurately, what we are dealing with is the cultural recognition of some concrete fact (piece of news, event) by means of its verification in terms of an existing text.

Procedures of this kind can be demonstrated with reference to the *chastushki* customarily performed when recruits go off into the army, one of the most stable forms of *chastushka* to circulate in Belozerye.<sup>1</sup> The texts themselves are not new; they are stored in the ‘passive vocabulary’ of the local society, as is indicated by the number of different times they are used. The novelty lies in the performance of these *chastushki* by a particular conscript. The local name for these *chastushki* — ‘necroot [sic.] songs’ makes clear their link with the ritual of accompanying conscripts into the army.<sup>2</sup>

*The necroots organise a big party meal, they get their friends along and their relations, and they see them a good time. Before the army, I gave up work. When I was in my early teens, the older lads who were going off to the army used to ride round in carts. Oh, the necroots, we’d say, they’re riding round today. They’d get up in the carts with a squeeze-box, they’d take someone along to play it and they’d ride off round the villages, saying goodbye. They’d sing show songs:*

*O the necroots the necroots  
Were breaking off twigs in the woods,  
But as for me, I was layin’  
On the stove with no pants to my name.*

*Do you remember the twig-breaking, they’d say? That’s a tradition that’s gone now. A lad would be going in the army, say. If there was a bird-cherry bush anywhere, somewhere on the vegetable plots, say, he’d break off a twig. That was called doing the twig-breaking. They’d hang some nice pretty strips of material on it and keep it till the lad was safe home.*

*Necroots, necroots don’t get much fun,  
They’re bored and feeling down,  
They’ve lost their homeland, every one,  
They’ve lost their lady loves.*

*If the necroot has a lady love, she’ll dress up the branch, if he doesn’t, his sister’ll do it. And of course they’ll heat the bath-house for him. It’s*

<sup>1</sup> On ‘recruiting’ *chastushkas* generally, see [Lazutin 1965: 207–22]; [Ploshchuk 1981: 127–44]; [Dukhovnaya kultura 1997: 232–3].

<sup>2</sup> References to my field records from Vologda Region include an identifying number (from the folklore data-base in the archive of St Petersburg University) where this exists; if a text not yet archived is cited, then the place and date of the record are given.

*the custom for the whole family to take a bath. Well, the lad's leaving home, isn't he? He'll not go off dirty, will he?*

*While the necroot was on his way,  
His sweetheart was so free,<sup>1</sup>  
But when they took him off to war,  
She said that true she'd be.*

*And my uncle used to sing this one way back when:*

*The doctors weighed and measured me,  
The measure creaked and groaned,  
Behind the frosted double doors  
My sweetheart gave a moan. [Recorded Rokosoma, 2002]*

Necroot songs are performed differently to conversational ones: more slowly and in a lower register. When informants are talking about being taken into the army, they often sing such songs as a commentary:

*It's my last night for having fun  
In the place where I was born,  
The last night that I'll lie asleep,  
Here in my mother's home.*

*It's hard to leave your parents' home,  
It's hard to go away,  
When you only have your mam to weep  
And your da is in his grave.*

*Necroots, eh necroots  
Were breaking off twigs in the woods.  
They broke them off and left them,  
They loved us, but they left us.*

*Necroots, eh necroots,  
See you stand all forlorn,  
You'll soon be snatched away  
From the place where you were born.*

*In the barracks in Belozerye  
In a house built of white stone,  
My hair is lying on the floor,  
They shaved me to the bone.*

*In the barracks in Belozerye  
I stood in the corner stripped,  
Eh, down my ballocks tears they ran,  
I wiped them with my shirt.*

*Soon, soon, the soldier's overcoat  
Will wrap my shoulders tight,  
Soon, soon, my lovely grey-eyed girl  
Will not be mine at night.*

<sup>1</sup> *Zanositsya*: to behave in a proud, stuck-up way. [Editor].

*Soon, soon, the soldier's overcoat  
Is what I'll have to wear.  
Soon, all too soon, I must forget  
My lovely grey-eyed girl.*

*Soon, soon, the train will soon arrive,  
The earth will shake and tremble,  
Soon, soon, my girl will howl and weep  
Watching us all assemble.*

*Soon, soon, I'll go off in the train,  
But I won't pay no fare,  
Eh, you sweet girls, may you have fun,  
Back in the village here. [Bel. 8–30]*

In contradistinction to the tradition obtaining in Archangel Region, where it was customary to perform laments when the conscripts were taken away, in Belozerye it is the *chastushka* that is the ritual genre for seeing men off into the army. Conversely, the public performance of the recruit *chastushka* is limited to one specific context — the ritual for seeing men off into the army, and its performers are always the recruits themselves. A *chastushka* sung for the first time by a young man in this context will become part of his repertoire, but performing it before he goes into the army would not be considered appropriate. The novelty in such ritual performance of *chastushki* lies in the fact that the performer is enacting a situation that is new for him, and also articulating his own thoughts and emotional responses to this situation. It is extremely significant that such thoughts and responses are externalised, both in terms of the underlying situation (conscription is compulsory and inescapable, not a matter of choice), and in terms of the way that a recruit expresses himself (the necroot *chastushka* gives specific cultural expression to personal feeling). The genre conventions of the *chastushka* control the inner — psychological — expression that the performer gives to his social role. Social relations of an interior kind are levelled down to universal experiences in the act of performing the text.

Alongside *chastushki* whose performance makes explicit personal experience, there are also numerous texts of an indicative kind, but which still fulfil the function of controlling the social environment. Irrational manifestations such as desire, fear, need, are accorded the same significance as real facts:

*Klavdiya Andreevna's brother got killed in a fight one holiday. The murderer did himself in later, slung a stone round his neck and jumped in the river. (A neighbour puts in here: 'God told him to do it.') In the village where the lads died they went round singing this chastushka:*

*Vanya Vlasov he got knifed,  
And Khrolov got a threat,*

*In the village of Anosovo  
There'll soon be no lads left.* [Bel. 18–366]

In the *chastushka*, facts, intentions, real and unreal phenomena are levelled out and contribute equally to the moral conclusions drawn.

Often we do not know who composed a particular *chastushka* relating to some event; an informant will say something about an event and then cite the *chastushka* composed to commemorate it:

*Once Dmitiry<sup>1</sup> was sitting in the threshing barn, and along comes Ekaterina and says she's come to him for good and she's never going back because Samson's been giving her a hard time. And then Dmitiry he goes and tells his parents, 'I've married Katka from Polotebnaya.' 'So where is she then?' they ask. 'Sitting in the barn,' he says. 'Well, bring her in then!' So that's how they got hitched, though my mother's relations were dead against it. They even made up a chastushka about it:*

*Eh you, Mitka, gypsy boy,  
Made off with Katka from Platevnoi...* [Volkov 1999: 290]

The *chastushka* sets down extreme elements in contemporary life (murders, elopements), and makes these the subject of reflection through the way that they are handled according to genre convention.

A remarkable example of how this works can be found in a recent anthology of Novgorod Region folklore, where it appears in a section under the title, 'Novellas. Anecdotes. Real-Life Stories'. A woman tells a story about how she was working as a shop assistant and set off with some of her wares to a different station because she wanted to complete her sales targets.<sup>2</sup> The plan to offload the goods didn't work out and she ended up missing the train back and having to carry the stuff back on foot.

*When I get back, all covered in sweat, my husband had already taken the cows back, the milk hadn't been skimmed. And so I go and skim it myself, and I go into the room and say, 'Evening, Volodya, love! The train went while I was having my dinner. And so I had to walk.' And then I lays down on the bed. But he jumps up and says: 'Hang on, I'm not putting up with this! I'll give you something to remember it by,' and of course I don't say nothing. So he grabs the [hair-cutting] machine:*

<sup>1</sup> Sic. (for Dmitry) [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> In the Soviet era, shop assistants, like everyone else, were subject to the stipulations of the planned economy: deliveries of goods would be made in compliance with norms set from above, in the state planning department. This led not only to the infamous shortages of popular goods, but to large surpluses of goods that could not be sold. An enterprising shop assistant could try to offload the latter by taking them to somewhere where they might be in bigger demand, as in this case. [Editor].

*'I'm going to cut all your hair off.' So he comes and cuts it all off.<sup>1</sup> Well, I don't say a word — it's better than a beating, doesn't hurt after all. Let him cut it, it'll grow back soon enough. But then, when I woke up the next morning, I says to him:*

*'Well, ducky, listen to this, I've made up a song for you:*

*From Terebutenets she ran,  
The girl, they'd done her wrong,  
No money in her pockets, and  
Her head shaved to the bone.*

*And he had to smile, and of course later he was sorry he'd done that to me [Traditsionnyi folklor 2001: No. 134].*

The title given by the editors to the text is: 'How I Made Up a *Chastushka*.' The performer sings of herself in the third person, placing her situation at one remove and seeing it from the position of an external observer. Conscious of the potential harmfulness of the event to her self-esteem, she reveals her own emotional experience of it to another person involved, makes her inner world public knowledge, and thus comes to terms with what has occurred. And the result of this speech act is also set out: the public recognition of a private conflict was rewarded by the successful resolution of external conflict (i.e. the quarrel with her husband).

Let me cite another example, this time from field recordings of the 1950s, where the *chastushka* also appears as a stylistic device that allows personal relationships to be articulated in public:

*A kolkhoz worker by the name of Minkina from Pogost village, Kemska village soviet, Kovzhinsk district, told us an interesting story. As she put it, the chastushka had helped her sort her life out. In the locality, people told us, 'Minkina used chastushki to win her husband back'. What Minkina herself told us was this: After he got back from the Front, her husband started messing round with another woman. Things started to get bad between him and Minkina. There was gossip flying round the village. People started to sing chastushki about Minkina. 'I'm no good at talking,' Minkina told us, 'so I started to think up chastushki.'*

*For thirty years I haven't sung,  
And wasn't planning to.  
You poked fun at me in your songs,  
Now I'll get revenge on you.*

*She sang this to them. 'Then I went along to the club and sang about everything: the rumours, my husband, our marriage, the early years, when we were young. And it worked: now me and my husband have a good life together' [Podgornaya, Sergeeva 1956: 47–8].*

<sup>1</sup> Cropping the hair was a terrible insult in Russian traditional peasant culture: a woman known as *postrizhennaya* (crop-hair) would be the butt of the village. See e.g. Ivan Stoliaroff, *Zapiski russkogo krest'yanina* [Memoirs of a Russian Peasant]. Paris, 1986. P. 33. [Editor].

In all the cases cited so far, a single principle is evident: the *chastushka* is used to make personal relationships explicit. The social result of the communicative act involved in the performance of the genre is that the sphere of intentions is made real, turned into a fact. In turn, through this conversion of intentions into general public knowledge, social reality is transformed: the reality in which *there'll soon be no lads left* (if the killers don't come to their senses) is fundamentally different from the reality where aggressive impulses are restrained. Conversely, the reality of inter-personal relations where one of the partners has recognised the absurdity of his or her own actions, and accepted the attempt of the other to restrain these, is fundamentally different from the reality where such a recognition has not taken place. And it is here that the performative significance of the *chastushka* lies. Although it is not a performative utterance in a formal sense, the *chastushka*, performed publicly, reshapes the social milieu by introducing into it the irrational domain of interpretation and making this public knowledge. By extension, the conventional resources of language thus absorb into themselves the irrational domain of interpretation. In the *chastushka*, personal opinion with pretensions to becoming public opinion is articulated. Therefore, for the legitimating force of the *chastushka* to be felt, it is essential that it be performed in the public domain.

The facts that are laid open to public judgement can be of different kinds. For instance, the performer of the *chastushka* may represent the personal sphere according to conventional linguistic formulae. The result of such a communicative act is to level down the potential mismatch between the self as seen by the self and the self as seen by others. An integration takes place — generated by the performer's own self-representation in the *chastushka* text — of the internal self into a multiplicity of external selves, a selection of different *personae*, whose explicit and predictable character facilitates effective social interaction. From the mid-1950s, collectors of the *chastushka* have seen this 'personalisation' as a persistent feature of the genre:

Every performer has an 'active vocabulary' of *chastushki* that are in tune with his or her individual character and personality, or which capture his or her actual life and experiences at the time the song is sung. Such *chastushki* are performed constantly. Alongside this 'active vocabulary' of material, each performer also has a 'passive vocabulary' of texts circulating locally that he or she knows, but seldom actually performs. One often hears an informant say, '*That puts me in mind of Marusya's chastushki,*' or, '*These are Klava's chastushki.*' When we asked why those particular texts were considered 'Marusya's own', we were told: '*Well, she's forever singing them,*' and when we went on to ask why that should be, the answer would follow: '*They're all about her,*' or, '*She's like that herself*' [Podgornaya, Sergeeva 1956: 46–7].

Even when a *chastushka* is composed or recomposed by someone on his or her own, it will always be ‘released’ into the public domain later on. The essence of this phenomenon is a shift in the boundaries between public and private, which dissolves the tension created in relationships by uncertainty about motivation and so on. There must be no differences in the interpretations of events characterising the various members of the social group.

*Lebedev did time as well. He had a fight over a girl. He was seeing her, then this lieutenant came home on leave, he was from the same village as she was. But Lebedev, he came from somewhere else. And the girl and the lieutenant got to know each other. And he decided to walk her home. Lebedev had a word with his mates over it. And there was a fight. The lieutenant got court-martialled, and Lebedev, he did time as well. And his sister used to sing this. Show chastushki, as we call them. She’d go to a dance over at Pogorelka.*

*I’m standing by the window pane,  
The casement’s open wide,  
Let my brother Slava out,  
He shouldn’t be inside.*

*Why should he be in prison for nothing, was what she meant. You get that all over the place now. That’s why there’s no space in the jails. But it’s a funny thing. I was in the third form at school then, when all that happened. And a lad from their village, a cousin of that Lebedev, would go round at break singing this chastushka:*

*Once in Vasyutino nearby  
A girl got called a cow,  
A lieutenant got a bloody nose,  
And the lads they got sent down. [Recorded Roksoma, 2001]*

After its first ‘public outing’ the ‘show *chastushka*’ will become common currency in the information exchange of the local community. Everyone in the village will know the *chastushka* that was once sung by the girl whose brother got sent to jail. The public circulation of the text, its multiple performances, will in turn set down a social precedent. Precedents of this kind can take diverse forms: murder in the course of a fight, someone’s threat to beat up a sexual rival, or the successful humiliation of such a rival. The multiple performances of the text by interested parties (i.e., everyone in the community) transfer the event to the register of ‘private affairs’ kept by public opinion, and relating to every member of the community; thus their ‘reputations’ are constituted.

But besides what one might term its ‘classificatory’ function, the *chastushka* also has another function: it underlines and makes publicly acceptable personal facts. The performer of the *chastushka* below remarked that the *chastushka* in question was one she had

made up herself, which points to the fact that the events described are drawn from her personal biography, despite being presented as a standard occurrence:

*My lad and I, we were in love,  
In love: we had to part.  
It wasn't us that did the deed,  
But people with kind hearts.*

[Interviewer's question:] *So did things like that happen?*  
*Of course. His mother didn't want him to marry me, and she went to a wizard.*

*They cooked up some spell, gave him something to eat or drink. So he'd fall out of love with me. Marry some other girl. Not me. Well, you see, it turned out: The people that split us up did me a favour. Kind people they were. After all, we wouldn't have been happy. He'd have dumped me anyway, they said. They said the spell wasn't going to last. He'd have dumped me later. He wouldn't have gone on loving me, noway [Recorded Roksoma, 2001].*

The *chastushka* records a concrete event from real life, setting this out as a linguistic formula, and creating its conceptual form through the fact of multiple performance. In the case just cited *it was my sister who was to blame for me being unhappy*.

At the same time — and this is the third function of the *chastushka*, a linguistic one, this time — each individual *chastushka* adds to the collective vocabulary of expressive resources: the strategies that allow a fact and its interpretation to hang together. The sense of a need for such a vocabulary can be sensed from the prevalence of manuscript collections of *chastushki* covering many pages of exercise books, which folklore collectors may well be invited to copy.<sup>1</sup>

M. Ya. Fenomenov, writing on the social life of the post-revolutionary Russian village, also noted this characteristic feature of the *chastushka*'s circulation. 'If a *chastushka* is a hit, then it will circulate in neighbouring villages as well. And the exchange of new poetic artefacts will not be limited to the appropriation of ready-made texts. Individual lines, images, turns of phrase will also migrate.' [Fenomenov 1925: 53]. A *chastushka* that gives pointed expression to its theme will both be popular in itself and also popularise individual stylistic features for use in further *chastushki*. Compare the following two field records, one made by me in Belozerye in 2003, and the other by Fenomenov in Valdai in the early 1920s:

<sup>1</sup> Significant here is the existence of amateur collectors of *chastushkas*. Usually they are people with some public role in life who have a need for a ready-made arsenal of performance texts, since they so often have to get up in public and recite these — at public discussions, parties, amateur concerts, and so on. [As might happen, say, with the chairman of the local collective farm or some other such local dignitary, when required to make a speech or propose a toast. Editor.]

*I said to my own voice, I said:  
Go rolling through the trees,  
Go calling to my own sweet love  
And bring him back to me. [Recorded Roksuma 2001]*

*I'll sing a song that's sad and harsh,  
My voice rings through the trees,  
Let my beloved hear me cry  
And bring him back to me. [Fenomenov 1925: 72]*

After a *chastushka* has become part of the general local store of knowledge, it may be adopted by some participant in events similar to those described in the *chastushka* as part of their own biography. At this point, public life ceases to be an essential part of the *chastushka*'s circulation. Sometimes *chastushki* are performed alone, in a kind of lyrical meditation. I have most often become aware of this phenomenon fortuitously, seeing elderly men and women sitting at home playing the accordion and singing *chastushki* 'for themselves'.

*I'd be best to say I'd best keep silent, [but] I want to say something [the informant is talking about a woman she used to be close friends with, 'We'd talk about everything together.'] And now I talk to myself, I sing chastushki on my own. Eh, once when I was singing them, Valya [her daughter] turned up. I was sitting there by the window, singing chastushki. And they turned up. I said, 'If you'd of got here a moment earlier, you'd of heard a concert.' And they say, 'What concert?' And I say, 'I was giving a concert, sitting singing chastushki,' — only not rude ones! (Laughs) [Vash. 8–20].*

Women often perform *chastushki* in this way while working — doing the laundry or harvesting crops, and the melodic characteristics of the performance are different from those used when the *chastushka* is sung in public.

*I used to go out to the harvest with my ma and everyone would be singing chastushki, they'd be reaping rye in the fields, corn [zhito]. And they'd sing them in a different way, back then. Like chants [prichety], in this dreary way.*

*I reaped the wheat, I reaped the rye,  
I ran into the dell,  
My beloved sings and plays  
The accordion so well.*

*I'll get the bridle, fetch the horse,  
Walk over the ploughed fields,  
My darling, you'll see who I am  
From my long auburn curls. [Bel. 8–91]*

Children would often be witness to such private *chastushka* recitals — no-one felt embarrassed about singing in their presence.

In sum, then, one can say that, in the *chastushka*, personal histories

are legitimated by exposure to general social judgements, after which the *chastushka* goes over into a type of performance that has no direct public significance, but which allows the performer to make sense of personal and general experience. *Chastushka* texts are signs synthesising the personal and the social — facts and meanings — and creating units of sense: linguistic motifs. And *chastushka* recitals turn sign-motifs of this kind into mini-narratives:

*So, having spent lots of time with Mari Vanna<sup>1</sup>, I can tell you straight — the chastushka is everything for her. Tale, song — the lot. It's a song for her, a chant [prichet] and everything else besides. She... she really... you'd think she lived for those chastushki... I dunno...*

[Interviewer's question:] *Can you remember any of her chastushki? What, me? Course I can.*

*Eh, you, Liligumz, village of mine,  
On a hill, not in a dell,  
They used not to bother with the girls,  
Now they like them very well.*

*The Liligumz girls, the girls so fine,  
They picked all the lads up,  
They picked them up, they picked them up  
But how to let them drop?*

*The lads, the lads, from Kyrgada,  
With the Churavlyan lads, their mates,  
Went off to market one fine day  
To flog their underpants.*

*And this chastushka too:*

*Down by the bank, down by the creek,  
Where the bridge fell in the slough,  
The first house by the highroad is  
Where Grisha fell in love.*

*She told me who in the village had sung what. I can't remember any of that any more. It was all from their district over there [Bel. 8–92].*

The records of *chastushki* and the commentaries above were passed to me by an informant of mine, the Belozerye journalist Larisa Busova, the author of a manuscript memoir of her grandmother baba Masha, or mama Masha (as Busova herself calls her). [MS, Sept. 2001]. The manuscript gives quite a clear picture of how the *chastushka* acts as the organising principle of biography:

*When they were taking the lads to the call-up point, my uncle Vanya Semenov turned round, looked at his home and everyone in the village, and suddenly started singing:*

<sup>1</sup> Colloquial corruption of 'Mariya Ivanovna', a common name and patronymic in Russian villages. [Editor].

*Farewell, you rivers and you lakes,  
You streams and crystal springs,  
Farewell Liligumz, village home,  
Where the girls they dance and sing.*

*It seemed to open the floodgates — tears started pouring out of the women, the first they'd shed all this time. Masha was seeing off her brother, went with him as far as Shambala stream. The recruits broke off twigs according to local custom, and Misha chose a birch, bent it to the ground, and twisted the twigs into a wreath. He decorated it with the things his sister gave him — ribbons, beads, strips of cloth. Masha, whenever she had a free moment, would rush off to the Shambala and take a look at the birch: was it in one piece? Was her brother safe? Her sorrow poured out into a song:*

*My brother he broke off a branch,  
For everyone to see,  
I remember him as I walk by,  
He left the branch for me.*

*If I had feathers, I had wings,  
To the war is where I'd speed,  
I'd look out for my brother there:  
Is he alive or dead?*

*In February 1943, when Masha's mother took ill, she made up a song:*

*Listen, mother, mother dear,  
And hear those sounds at dawn:  
Is it not your children crying there  
Half-way across the world?*

*The lad Masha was sweet on married another girl. His mother was against Masha. Masha healed the hurt with songs:*

*I go, I get up from my bed,  
And every time I say:  
Why should I hurry to be doing:  
My love has gone away!*

*I never thought my lovely lad  
Would go and do me wrong,  
It wasn't him that split us up,  
It was his nasty mum.*

*No, lass, you shouldn't let yourself  
Get moithered by this loss:  
You must forget your former love  
And heal your broken heart.*

*Masha herself married Sasha Kumichev, who came back from the Front to find he had no family left — his father and mother had died before he got there. They didn't have a proper wedding, they put their stuff on a wood-sledge and took it over to the far side of the village.*

*Oh my sweet love, his name is Sasha,  
Yes, Sasha is his name,  
His father's name was Nikanor,  
As the fashion was those days.*

The next example points to the semantic principle according to which external events — praise and the arrival of a ‘missing in action, believed dead’ telegram — become integrated into personal biography:

*I was told this story by Antonina Ivanovna Vasilyeva, who lives in the village of Kritino. The story was about her sister. Can't remember now what she was called, the sister, I don't think. It was her older sister and she was known all round the village for her lovely voice, for her singing of chastushki and for making them up herself. Unfortunately, Antonina Ivanovna only gave me one example, which went with the following story. It was during the war. She began by telling me how her sister had two skirts. One black wool one, and another, I can't remember what colour, but it suited her a lot. She wore the second skirt to one festival, and then the next time she turned up in the black one. And one of the village women came up to her and said, 'Eh there, lass, you should always wear that skirt, it suits you a lot. But leave off the other one, it hangs down like a sack. Doesn't suit you.' Well then. And then, literally the day later or the next day, the 'missing in action, believed dead' telegram arrived. To say that he'd been killed. Her sweetheart. And of course she made up a chastushka about it:*

*My skirt is dark, my skirt is black,  
The people praised the hue,  
They didn't know my dearest love  
Was killed in forty-two. [Bel. 8–91]*

The semantic motivator behind the synthesis of two external events is black as the traditional symbol of mourning, and it is round this motif that the text is organised. The two events described are placed in the past. But they are not the subject of the utterance, which, rather, is the performer's definition of herself in terms of a symbol not directly glossed in the text. The utterance in the *chastushka* creates a picture of the performer that is outside time, unlike the events mentioned in it. ‘My fate is to be a widow’ is roughly the meaning conveyed. The *chastushka* unites realia and events that are fixed in temporal and spatial terms with a characterisation and self-definition that is not so fixed. In the example below, the traditional symbol of the river and the category term ‘youth’ function in comparable symbolic terms:

*A lad came back from the army with a lot of money on him. And the Rostansky lads they killed him there by the river. They took all his money and threw him in the water. He had a girl he was walking out with. Before the army, that is. And the girl made up a poem for him:*

*My sweetest love was slaughtered there  
Where the river rapids rise,  
Yes, over by the riverbank  
Is where he closed his eyes.*

*My sweetest love was slaughtered, and  
They cut him into swathes.  
To think of all that wasted youth  
Would put you in a rage. [Bel. 8–6]*

Thus, the utterance in the *chastushka* achieves two kinds of social effect. First of all, it creates a social precedent: the boundaries separating the internal, hidden, world, and the external, public, world, are shifted. Alongside the specific social context — such as the party to see off recruits, or other such gathering of young people — that prompts such a move, a part is also played by the personal initiative of the performer in this process. Such initiative may be overtly approved by the community, or simply ignored (which means the *chastushka* gets forgotten.) Making public the personal — feelings, evaluations, needs — invokes the public at large as witnesses, and accords to the community the right to control, ratify, approve or condemn what it is witnessing. This kind of social action might be named as co-ordination: the *chastushka* hauls some event or other out of the tide of time and fixes its coordinates on the universal map of social space, transforming it by this action. The precondition of this process is the public nature of the *chastushka* genre. The performance of the *chastushka* outside the public domain, in private, for oneself, fulfils other functions: series of *chastushki* performed in this setting create a personal history that is set out in formulae of a general kind, ones ratified in advance by the social milieu.

The public performance of *chastushki* by older people — not *young whipper-snappers*, but *bosses* ('great folk')<sup>1</sup> represents a secondary form of *chastushka* performance. In performances of this kind, the *chastushka* form itself becomes a signifier redolent of its primary context — the youth gathering. The lack of correspondence between the actual social context and the one presupposed by the *chastushka* genre creates a comic effect, which is connected with a particular kind of playful social interaction.

## II

In *chastushka* utterances, a general principle is evident: a concrete fact fixed in space and time is co-ordinated with a universal location in the symbolic domain of the given social unit. This co-ordination takes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Great folk' (*bolshaki, bolshukhi*): traditional names for the head of house and the senior female (usually, but not necessarily, his wife) in a patriarchal Russian peasant household. [Editor].

place as a result of the set of particular linguistic strategies that characterise the *chastushka*'s pragmatic function as a genre of folklore.

One such strategy is the trope. In order to describe how this functions in the *chastushka*, we need first to consider how it functions in the utterance more generally. N. D. Arutyunova, in her characterisation of the trope from the point of view of its communicative orientation, has suggested that one should distinguish two basic functions that each influence the categorical and lexical significance of a given word in an utterance. These are 'the function of identifying the topic that is being articulated in the theme of the utterance (or more exactly by the subject and other actants associated with concrete referents), and the predicative function as articulated in the reme. All other syntactical positions either contribute to the realisation of one or other of these communicative functions, or to a synthesis of both. Among the syntactic positions that can be described as functionally mixed in effect is the position of the proper name in the existential proposition (or whatever formulation is equivalent to this) and the position relating to the form of address' [Arutyunova 1998: 347].

Here, I also propose to make a distinction between the identificational (thematic) and predicative (rematic) elements in the utterance, and will analyse separately the subject matter (plot) of the *chastushka*, and its linguistic features. In this case the 'functionally mixed in effect' positions — the proper name and form of address that Arutyunova refers to at the end of the passage just quoted — turn out to have an absolutely specific role, as I will demonstrate below. The forms of address, proper names, and the deictic indicators connected with the person making an utterance and with its context (the pronouns, finite verbs, etc.) determine the pragmatic formula of the utterance, making explicit at the level of the communicative procedure the dynamic parameters in operation. The trope is the link between these two levels, connecting the plot/subject matter and the actual communicative context.

Let us now turn to various specific *chastushka* texts with the aim of establishing the role played in these by the trope.

*The village of Iskrino it was  
The one I loved the best,  
But now the path is overgrown,  
For my own true love is dead.* [Bel. 8–31]

'The path is overgrown' is a universal metaphor in folklore.<sup>1</sup> The motif represented in the plot line of this *chastushka*, that of the encroachment of saplings ('fir saplings, birch saplings, thick bitter ash saplings') or grass is formulaic in the folk song:

<sup>1</sup> On the semantics of this metaphor in folklore, see [Gerasimova 1985].

*Go visit your dear old ma,  
 Go visit your dear old ma,  
 While your ma is still around,  
 While your ma is still around,  
 The path cuts through the ground.  
 But when your ma is gone,  
 But when your ma is gone,  
 The path will get overgrown.  
 O, the path will get overgrown,  
 The path so wide and long,  
 With thistles and with grass,  
 With thistles and with grass,  
 With saplings and with trees.<sup>1</sup>*

This universal trope, which customarily gets used in a predicative position in song texts, is also placed in this position in the *chastushka*. The difference is that in the latter, the theme of the communication is indicated by an indexical sign — a proper name ('Iskrino'), which unambiguously specifies the subject of the utterance. The introduction of the trope into the reme of the utterance alters the theme, setting up new possibilities of interpretation. The name of the village here does not point to a spatial phenomenon as such, but to the relationship between this phenomenon and the projection of it in the inner world of the person making the utterance. N. is saying that in her inner world 'the village of Iskrino' has ceased to exist, and this event is represented as something current, immediate.

One of the most popular strategies for employing the trope as a basis for interconnecting the general and the personal is drawing a connection between two different contexts, in one of which a verbal form is used in its literal meaning, and in the other in its figurative meaning:

*The lamp, the lamp shone bright and strong,  
 It soaked up paraffin,  
 But the thing that soaks my heart's blood up  
 Is the widow's handsome son.*

*Beyond the river there are bogs,  
 The mud is thick and dark,  
 But the boys who live beyond the bogs  
 Have made our hearts dry up. [Bel. 8–18]*

'To dry up' is a universal trope in folklore, signifying to wilt, to suffer the pains of love. And the fact that these two texts, which have in common this trope, are usually performed together points in turn to the fact that it is precisely common tropes according to which texts are classified by *chastushka* performers.

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<sup>1</sup> From the repertoire of the folk-singer Kalinkina. Recorded 1926. My thanks to A. V. Nikitina for making this text available to me.

The next example is analogous. In the second line, the ‘white shirt from the Kuban’ could be understood in its literal meaning, but in the fourth line this formulation is used as a trope. In turn the trope (here a synecdoche) determines the reme (the supplementary information contained in the predicative section of the sentence): the reference to a concrete ‘sweetheart’:

*I've dreamt, I've dreamt, I've dreamt four nights  
Of a shirt from the Kuban,  
And now I find myself in love  
With a shirt from the Kuban.* [Bel. 8–31]

The assignation of universal predicates to a personal situation is a governing strategy in the *chastushka*. ‘Slaughtered where the river rapids rise’, ‘to dry up’, ‘to be overgrown’ are iconic signs of emotional relationships. They are placed in the predicative part of the utterance and are associated with actants (subjects and objects) which in their turn fulfil an identificational function (address a concrete personal event). ‘Identificational words reflect and classify what “exists in the world”. They, as it were, stand in for the world in communications about the latter. The predicates express “what we think about the world”. The former are directed towards objective reality, the latter towards the subject perceiving this’ [Arutyunova 1998: 39].

The task of the *chastushka* is the interpretation of a concrete fact, the inclusion of this in a specific taxonomic class. It is the latter which is the novelty, that constitutes the information as such in the utterance, and therefore description of the fact that is subject to interpretation can be reduced to a minimum.

*They talked, they talked, they talked: they said  
The things they had to say,  
O, to think of all those mean old hags  
That gossiped all the day.* [Bel. 8–10].

A second, equally important, strategy in the *chastushka* is the co-ordination of different levels of fact by means of the comparison and contrast of the sound elements used to describe these:

*Are you hiding that your heart is melting,  
Or could I be the one to bluff?  
Maybe you're falling out of love,  
Or it could be I've had enough.* [Bel. 8–11]

In the first and second lines of the Russian, a pun is made using the verbs *tayat* [to melt], and *tait* [to hide, keep secret]. Two similar-sounding words determine very different actions. In the third and fourth lines, the synonymous expressions ‘to fall out of love’ and ‘to have enough’ are used. The employment of similar phrasing with quite different meaning, or similar meaning differently expressed, is

underpinned by the use of syntactic parallelism. The finite verbs and personal pronouns used in the *chastushka* utterance allow one to demonstrate, at any given moment, a general rule: the dissimilarity of form and content set up by the poetic construction of the text.

One of the most significant correlations in terms of my analysis here is the relationship between the role of the genre as agent of expression and the specifics of a given context. 'The data relating to the syntactic typology of languages indicate that there are two different approaches to life, which may play different roles in different languages. One can look at life from the point of view of "what I can do", that is, emphasise agency, or from the point of view of "what happens to me", that is, emphasise the passivity of the human subject' [Vezhbitskaya 1996: 55].

Human subjects that see themselves as passive will enact or submit to the parameters of reality, but will not challenge or alter those parameters. This kind of perception of reality is expressed and reinforced in the impersonal constructions of Russian syntax (*mne dumaetsya*, 'the thought occurs to me', *mne veselo*, *mne grustno* 'cheerfulness/sorrow grips me' [lit.: it is to me cheerful/sorrowful, but the routine way of expressing 'I feel cheerful/sad'], and so on. Such expressions are also characteristic of the syntax used in folkloric texts.

It has been hypothesised that the emotionality, 'irrationality', lack of agency that Vezhbitskaya sees as characteristic of Russian linguistic consciousness is determined by specific features of Russian cultural reality. 'Impersonal constructions record cognitive models formed in the national consciousness and reflecting prototypical situations. The human subject is at the centre of a situation and at the same time has no power over this. S/he is subjected to a higher (external or internal) force' [Arutyunova 1998: 806].

Also of interest is Arutyunova's hypothesis on the evolutionary history of impersonal constructions in Russian. She comments on singular constructions in the neuter of the type *uneslo*, *vodilo* and phrases with reflexive verbs such as *ne siditsya*<sup>1</sup> that 'such constructions were not characteristic either of Church Slavonic or of Old Russian. They developed on Russian soil, and, moreover, at a late date' [Arutyunova 1998: 801].

Thus, on the one hand, we have a hypothesis relating to the cognitive associations of such constructions, and on the other, a hypothesis

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<sup>1</sup> These constructions cannot be translated adequately into idiomatic English. The neuter third person singular *uneslo* etc. is used in phrases such as *sad zalilo vodoi*, 'the garden got flooded', literally, 'it flooded with water the garden', and the reflexive construction in phrases such as *ne spitsya* (I can't sleep, literally, it doesn't sleep itself to me). [Editor].

relating to their historical development: they increase in number during the early modern and modern period. The conclusion has to be either that the underlying cognitive models either developed in the Russian mentality at that period, or that they found linguistic expression only at that period. As a matter of fact, however, a number of facts relating to linguistic and cultural typology, rather than to the history of the language, might make one doubt the validity of either hypothesis.

1. The denial on the part of a speaker of his or her responsibility for the utterance through the employment of passive forms and reference to ‘higher powers’ is, as 2. J. B. du Bois argued, a typological characteristic of ritual speech in traditional cultures generally [Du Bois 1998: 215–23].

2. Spontaneous dialect speech and ritual folklore (e.g. laments) generally abound in impersonal constructions.

These facts make it possible see ‘lack of agency’ or ‘active passivity’ as just one of the fundamental models underlying the Russian mentality, whose linguistic manifestations are not inevitable, but related to specific pragmatic considerations.

Against the background of the assumption that ‘higher powers’, rather than human subjects, are endowed with the capacity for action, the shift to linguistic agency acquires particular significance. Those who know that the human subject does not have the power to alter real circumstances exercise critical difference with regard to the likely level of responsibility exercised by an individual when he or she manifests linguistic or behavioural initiative.

E. Benveniste observed [Benvenist 1974: 288] that the speaker fully appropriates to himself the resources of language when speaking as the subject of a sentence. This gesture of linguistic appropriation signifies that the speaker considers him- or herself the initiator of circumstances, at a linguistic level if nothing else; it also imposes a sense of responsibility for the given speech act.

The use of the present and future tense in the first person of an active verb is associated with the highest sense of personal responsibility. The impression is that an action resulting in such an utterance and its consequences are completely under the speaker’s control.<sup>1</sup>

As it emerges, it is song texts associated with calendar rituals and rites of passage, and spells — which is to say, genres that shape ritual

<sup>1</sup> Cf. The complex process associated with the polarity of responsibility and dissimulation could probably best be named as *personal responsibility*. It comprises the flood of answers that a person offers to the world in which he lives, to the gaze of his God, and to the tribe from which he comes’ [Rozenshtok-Khussi 1995: 79].

events and events of central social significance — that act as the source from which speech-agent forms are drawn in folklore. All the more interesting, then, is the fact that such speech-agent forms are actively employed in the genre of the *chastushka*, which no-one has supposed to be of ritual origin, let alone to have ritual associations in terms of its everyday circulation:

*I walk beside the little house  
Where my mother-in-law resides,  
Trying to melt her stony heart  
So that she'll let out my bride.*

*I walk along the path, I walk  
The path so strait and long,  
And no-one cares for me at all,  
And I am not the one.*

*I'll only forget you, my dear love,  
When I go into the forge,  
And lay myself on the anvil down,  
Beat out a metal heart. [Bel. 8–19]*

There can be a definite mismatch between the social status of the speaker him- or herself and the persona adopted in the speech act of the *chastushka*. As I argued above, the person performing the *chastushka* in its original context (the young people's gathering) represents him- or herself for other people, and models his or her social self in the act of speaking. When an older person adopts the genre in public, though, he or she is 'in inverted commas' twice over — both as an actual speaker and in his or her relation to the lyric hero. The speaker adopts a social status that is inappropriate ('youthful' rather than of mature years), and uses this as a mask, which in turn allows him or her to escape from the 'show' character of the *chastushka*, to deflect responsibility for what is said on to the role that he or she is playing.

In the act of speaking, the *chastushka* performer takes on him- or herself the right to assign roles in the utterance in question; the public has the choice of either assenting to these roles, or of disagreeing with them in an active sense — in other words, asserting initiative in return. The 'I' of the *chastushka* text is the subject both of the utterance and of the social act that is constituted by this utterance. The role that the speaker assigns to him- or herself when using a given form is the role of the bearer of general knowledge, or, to be more accurate, of opinion at large. The result of this is the equation of a given situation and general knowledge (public opinion). And it is precisely in this connection that the *chastushka* utterance may be qualified as a performative act — it constitutes social reality. The 'I' (of the speaker) adopts a particular set of linguistic conventions, and thus also a certain social role. The function of this role is to make

public, disseminate, or contest information. The ‘I’ of the speaker uses the ‘I’ of the role to assert the existence of a particular fact. This conventional procedure is associated with a particular type of speech organisation — in this case, the *chastushka*.

A speech register is also identified by the semiotic devices that are used to determine the social domain of an action. The repertoire of gestures that is associated with *chastushka* performance is remarkably stable: the performer comes to a standstill in the middle of a dance, stamps his or her foot, and begins singing, directing the song at the addressee — though in fact the real addressee of the *chastushka* is society at large. Society acts as the arbiter and ratifier of the facts presented in the text being performed. Thus, the actual addressee and the addressee named in the text (assuming there is one) do not correspond. ‘I am speaking to you, to someone, to no-one, but I want everyone to listen.’ We are dealing with a form of playful social interaction that is over-determined by tradition and convention.

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*Translated by Catriona Kelly*