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## FOLK ORAL PERSONAL EXPERIENCE STORIES: COMMUNICATIVE CONVENTIONS AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

### **Abstract**

The subject of the article is the communicative and narrative parameters of oral personal supernatural experience stories. The study is based on the corpus of oral stories about contacts with supernatural forces or creatures, as well as about watching the signs of destiny, recorded in interviews which have taken place in the villages of the North of Russia (Archangel and Vologda Regions) during folklore-anthropologic expeditions of the last 40 years. Interviews are stored in the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University and in the Electronic Database "Russian Day-to-day Life". The majority of stories about encounters with the supernatural, transcribed word for word, turn out to be not the consecutive and logical account of events but a chain of remarks by the event participants and the narrator's comments to such remarks like dramatic performances. Oral supernatural narratives have more complicated composition than "classic" von Sydow "the first person" and "the third person" schemes. We are dealing with the type of narrative whose events occurred regarding the third person, but whose story is told in the first person with constant

references to the original narrator. In every story we hear the chorus of different voices: of witnesses, interpreters, advisers – co-participants in events and experience. We may suggest that the more literary, formal and written a culture becomes, the fewer number of voices is heard in performance and the more narrator-concentrated and the less polyphonic is the story.

**Keywords:** folk prose, Russian folklore, field material, oral personal stories, supernatural experience, communicative parameters, performance, polylogue form, communicative levels of folk narrative

The subject of this study is the communicative and narrative parameters of oral personal supernatural experience stories. On the one hand, I am interested in the way oral stories are organized, and on the other hand, in how the actual storytelling is performed in real communication.

My study has been based on the corpus of oral stories about contacts with supernatural forces or creatures, as well as about watching the signs of destiny, recorded in interviews which have taken place in the villages of the North of Russia (Archangel and Vologda Regions) during folklore-anthropologic expeditions of the last 40 years (for the last 30 years the author was a participant and then the chief of the fieldwork). These interviews are stored in the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University and in the Electronic Database “Russian Day-to-day Life”.<sup>1</sup>

The analyzed stories have been collected for 40 years in the villages of the Russian North in two regions:

- **Archangel Region** (collections – Vinogradovskoye, Kargopolskoye, Leshukonskoye, Mezenskoye, Onezhskoye, Pinezhskoye, Plesetskoye);
- **Vologda Region** (collections – Belozerskoye, Vashkinskoye, Velikoustyuzhskoye, Verkhovazhskoye, Syamzhenskoye,

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<sup>1</sup> RUSSIAN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE.

Kaduyskoye, Kirillovskoye, Cherepovetskoye, Nyuksenskoye, Totemskoye).

I have read texts from the following genre folders:

- Folder 19 “Mythological Stories” (1265 files),
- Folder 20a “Stories about sorcerers, evil eye, etc.” (1175 files),
- Folder 22 “Stories about superstitions, prophetic dreams and fortune-telling” (1282 files).

The studied narratives are stored at the St. Petersburg State University Folklore Archive, where they are classified as the “mythological narratives”. The field of the “mythological narratives”, according to the Russian folklore genre classification consists of so called *bylichka* and *byval'shchina*.

The field of non-fictional prose has long been in the shadow of folktale research. Therefore, studies of composition and speech conventions of folk prose in Russian/Soviet and Western folklore studies began in the middle of the 20th century. Kirill V. Chistov expresses a general opinion about the complexity of analytical operations with non-fictional prose: “Legends, historical legends, *byval'shchina*, oral stories do not stand out so clearly from the stream of everyday prose and do not differ in structural independence and completeness. They are not self-contained aesthetic systems, but, as it were, manifestations or elements of more extensive cognitive, worldview systems”.<sup>2</sup> Later researchers of non-fictional prose tried to find its structural independence.

The field of the “mythological narratives”, according to the Russian folklore genre classification consists of so called *bylichka* and *byval'shchina*. *Bylichka* is defined by the Russian folklore scholars as a non-fictional story about any contact, confrontation or interaction between humans and supernatural characters (spirits of the house, bathhouse, of a river, of a field, walking dead, etc.) or phenomena (casting an evil

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<sup>2</sup> CHISTOV 1964, 6.

eye, putting a spell, witnessing of the signs of destiny, prophetic dreams, etc.), narrated in the 1st person.<sup>3</sup> *Byval'shchina* is defined as a story this the same topic but which is told in the 3rd person. A plot of *byval'shchina* usually is more stereotyped and formulaic, which brings it closer to a folktale. But *byval'shchina* differs from a folktale by a pragmatic indicator of the narrator's relation to the events of the story, he/she believes that they took place in reality. The definitions of *bylichka* and *byval'shchina* were adopted by folklorists from the folk nomenclature of speech genres. During the expedition in the 1910 to the Belozersk district of the Vologda region, the brothers Yuri Matveyevich and Boris Matveyevich Sokolov heard and recorded these definitions of genres from the folk performers themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Carl Wilhelm von Sydow in 1939 proposed to divide popular prose into three categories according to the narrator's point of view. Accordingly, the classification was based on the inline person indicator and topic:

- *memorats* – stories of people about the events of their lives from their own memories;
- *chronicates* – “all kinds of reminiscences set forth in the form of a statement”;
- *fabulates* – “crystallization of various elements of those concepts and observations that come from real events and observations of life”.<sup>5</sup>

Later it is used in the folk studies work to tell mainly about two prose categories: the narrative in the 1st person is a *memorats*, the narrative in the 3rd person is the *fabulates*. As for the von Sydow's term *fabulate*, this word has drifted and become ambiguous. *Fabulates* can include folktales/Märchen (narrations told as fiction). The counterpart of *memorate* in

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<sup>3</sup> POMERANCEVA 1968, 283–284; VOSTOCHNOSLAVYANSKIY FOLKLOR 1993, 26; ZINOV'EV 1987, 382.

<sup>4</sup> SOKOLOVY 1915.

<sup>5</sup> VON SYDOV 1948.

the genre of legend/ Sagen might be referred to *Migratory Legends* according to Reidar Th. Christiansen.<sup>6</sup> Using material of Norwegian folk prose, he compiled the index of migratory legends on the topics: "The Black Book of Magic", "Witches and Witchcraft", "Legends of the Human Soul, of Ghosts and Revenants", "Spirits of Rivers, Lakes and the Sea", "Trolls and Giants", "The Fairies", "Domestic Spirits", "Local Legends of Places, Events and Persons". Over time, similar indexes have been created for other national collections. For the Russian non-fictional ("mythological") folk prose it was made by Valery P. Zinov'ev.<sup>7</sup> The definition of "mythological" actualizes non-linguistic (person indicator), but the thematic principle of identifying genres. In this case, mythology means the system of actual beliefs of the peasantry. Starting from the 19th century, researchers of folk literature (who were mostly representatives of the elite estates – the nobility and commoners) considered the peasantry, on the one hand, as a treasurer of the folk art and the memory of the "golden age" of Russian history, and on the other hand, as a backward class in need of in education and management. The system of peasant customs, ideas and social organization was defined as "mythological". Archaic "mythological" characters (spirits of rivers, lakes and forest, sorcerers, witches, domestic spirits) still serve as the thematic marker of folklore authentic prose about the supernatural.

Without setting within the framework of this work the aim of revising the genre nomenclature Russian folklore, I prefer to use for stories that could be defined as *bylichka*, *memorate or migratory legend*, a descriptive definition *personal experience stories about supernatural*. I follow colleagues in contemporary legends and spontaneous urban texts researches in this way.<sup>8</sup> If in this paper I use definitions "mythological", then only as a tribute to the history of the publication of the genre

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<sup>6</sup> CHRISTIANSEN 1958.

<sup>7</sup> ZINOV'EV 1987.

<sup>8</sup> BENNET 1987; STAHL 1977; 1983.

(the collections of “mythological stories” are still published in Russia.<sup>9</sup> I try avoid using the adjective “mythological”, preferring the definition “non-fictional”.

As a result of analysing large number of folklore stories about encounters with the supernatural, recorded in the 1970s–80s from the Russian population in Eastern Siberia, V.P. Zinoviev described the plot scheme:

- 1) the norm of the relationship between a person and some supernatural being is reported;
- 2) this norm is observed or violated;
- 3) there is an unexpected meeting with a supernatural being, its nature depends on compliance or non-compliance with the norm;
- 4) the outcome, which also depends on the fulfilment or violation of the conditions.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to typical episodes in the development of the plot, V.P. Zinoviev notices the following recurring details of the narrative: reliable description (witnesses, place, date, appeal to those present for confirmation); the result, when the narrator “is surprised, expresses his excitement, his confusion before the opportunity to find the objective reasons for what happened”.<sup>11</sup> Zinoviev’s scheme practically coincides with the structure of personal experience stories by William Labov. The ethnolinguist has identified the following blocks in “spontaneous” stories about the personal experience of mortal dangers:

- The *summary* serves as a “bait” in the conversation: if the interlocutors agree with the proposed topic, the storytelling is sanctioned by the audience;
- The *orientation* indicates the location, time and participants of the event;
- The *Complication*;
- The *Resolution*;

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<sup>9</sup> ZINOVEV 1987; CHEREPANOVA 1996.

<sup>10</sup> ZINOVIEV 1987, 390.

<sup>11</sup> ZINOVIEV 1987, 391.

- The *Coda* returns from the time of the story events to the moment of the story-telling;
- The *Evaluation* is expressed “by direct affirmation, lexical reinforcement, suspension or repetition, symbolic action or judgment of the third person”.<sup>12</sup>

Describing the stories analysed in this study, we can say that they all relate to non-fictional prose. Storytellers believe with **varying degrees of confidence** that the events they are reporting took place in reality. Another distinctive feature is **the presence of supernatural** forces and actors in the events that happened. Almost all stories contain **an evaluation** (according to Labov) or ideas about the norm of relationships with supernatural forces (according to Zinoviev). The biggest challenge is defining the point of view in those stories. It is this last point that is the subject of special attention within the framework of this article. Most of the storytellers talk about personal experiences about the encounter with the supernatural, but personal experiences may not be their own. Thus, storytellers can be talking about someone else’s (their parents’, grandparents’, close friends’, or neighbours’) supernatural experience, but they do so in a very special way. Before proceeding to the analysis of the actual oral modus of the narration of someone else’s experience, let us say a few words about the method of collecting research material.

All oral narratives have several clear distinctive features. First of all, the stories have been recorded as a result of in-depth interviews concerning folklore, rites, lifestyle, local history, crafts etc. in situations of rather trustful communication between the interviewers and the interviewees. In most of the interviews, the professional initiative and curiosity of the folklorists is balanced by the elder age and richer life experience of their partners in conversation. In such circumstances the interview progresses in the format of “horizontal”

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<sup>12</sup> LABOV, WALETZKY 1967, 32–41.

communication without any strict frames set by a folkloristic or anthropologic guide.

Secondly, during the last two decades all interviews have been recorded with audio media for transcription and archiving. Digitalization of field work enabled us to record the whole dialogue instead of certain folklore genres. The limitless nature of digital media makes it possible to fix detailed context information as well as the visual aspects of each story: more replies and remarks before and after the storytelling have been recorded. All those details preserve the most valuable and authentic features of oral communication.

The majority of stories about encounters with the supernatural, transcribed word for word, turn out not to be the consecutive and logical account of events but a chain of remarks by the participants of the event and the narrator's comments to such remarks. Those narratives seem like dramatic performances – they include dialogues, replies of “*dramatis personae*”, different voices. All the actors of the event have different relations with the storyteller. In this sequence of “scenes from memory” we have several levels of communication built into each other just like a *matryoshka* doll.

I want to show that oral supernatural narratives have more complicated composition than “classic” von Sydow “the first person” and “the third person” schemes. In in the vast majority of stories, the narrator presents a supernatural encounter which had happened with someone mentioned in the story and which was interpreted by someone else. In these cases, the narrator has not been the witness of or participant in the events which are the subject of the storytelling. The narrator retells the story heard from the “primary narrator”.<sup>13</sup> We are dealing with the type of narrative, whose events occurred with the third person, but the story of which is told in the

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<sup>13</sup> Hereinafter the narratives immediately following the “mythological encounter” are called the “primary stories”, and storytellers of such narratives are primary storytellers or primary narrators.



first person with constant references to the original narrator. The truthfulness of supernatural events is confirmed by multiple markers of the eye-witnesses' discourse – like “they say” (*govorjat*), “he/she says” (*govorit*) and so on. Let me show the marked features using the example of a story recorded in 2002 in the Vologda region.

About “leshij” – the spirit of the forest

God has his own ways and means, there is anything and everything here and around. You would hear no lies from me as my mother **told us** this story. At home we were sitting and **she told** to us, her children, and to some others too, so she **told everybody**, how once upon a time she went fishing with our grandfather, her father, and they lost their way. Darkness had fallen and they were still in the woods. So they went through the woods and came along a fir tree. Wild it was, big and fluffy. But nevertheless her father **says**: “Let us sit here, Anyuta, – **he says**, – right under this fir tree, – **he says**, – and let us make a fire – **he says** – and spend the night there, under the tree – **he says**”.

In the autumn it was. So they made the fire, a good one, and **as she told me**, here they were sitting under the very fir tree. Suddenly, **she says**, comes a man, **she says**, a tall one, and they see, she and her father, **she says**, that he is coming right to them. So tall he is, **she says**, oh so tall, in high boots, **she says**, with the collars up to this level, **she says**. There he comes, **she says**, and stamps the fire out. Tramples the fire with his feet, like, **she says**, no single log left, even the smallest chip. We are speechless, **she says**, no word, no sound, just sitting very close to each other, **she says**. And this man walks away **and says**: “The girl is quite small, – **he says**, – and you being an elderly man, – **he says**, – how dare you to make this fire?”. Though their fire was on his footpath. That was what **he said**, and **as she told me**, she remembered his words all right.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Folklore Archive of St.Petersburg State University, Bel19–213. Recorded July 06, 2002 in village Borok, Belozerskiy district, Vologda Region, from Alexandra Ivanovna Veretennikova, born in 1925 in village Slobodka, by Olga Kadikina, *Julia Gizha Y.*

The storyteller reminds the listener that ‘he says’ or ‘she says’, using similar references twenty times. When legends were published in the pre-digital era, such markers were usually deleted by the folklorists because the phrases were seen to have little value for the plot, or they were removed by the editors so the text would flow better. But our analysis deals with the story-telling performance, so the presence of these markers reveals both the multi-layered structure of communication within the story and the number of speakers.

Let us apply W. Schmid’s narratology scheme of communication levels<sup>15</sup> to the oral narrative, paying special attention to names and references used at each level in order to identify who addresses whom in each response and how many voices are heard in the story.

I’ve heard this story myself. From the father <father of the story’s heroine> (Father has built the hospital here. It is still standing on the high bank right near the quay.) “I had a daughter, – **he said**, –she was a bride. And a son of marriageable age. The son, – **he said**, – went to collect some stacked hay”. Back they go with the hay – and see a maid riding to the forest on the back of a dog. Just imagine – on the back of a dog! Wearing only a... Some light cloths in the winter cold... And here they are returning with the hay. So **she says**: “Look, it is our girl going on the back of a dog! Where is she riding? Call her, by all means! Shout as loud as you can!” And the **son said**: “No good trying to call her... She is already far away!” Their horse pulled the sledge forward and they pass on. So they return to the village. So the wife ran to the house and **said**: “Hey, mother, – **she said**, – our... (she calls her daughter by name)... where is she? – **she asked**”. “The master of the forest has taken her...” – **she said**. “What have you done? Why did you let him take her?” “I’ve called him when I saw her standing with a lad”. (Just imagine how stern the old women were at that time. No messing around with young fellows!) “What have you done”, **she said**, “oh what have you done”. So no

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<sup>15</sup> SCHMID 2003, 39–49.

more trips for the hay. They went to the old ladies. "What shall we do now, how can we retrieve our girl?" "Has your old mom got mad? – **they say**. And it was noon. "What will happen to her if the... master of the forest takes you". So to make a long story short the old **ladies said**: "Harness three horses. Go to three churches to hold three services. In the same hour... Just tell the priests that the services shall be held at a particular time". For example, they would go to Trinity, go to Trinity and there was a church in Kurumeni. Well, on this side, they would go to three churches. So they rode to three churches and attended services there. I do not know, in whose honor or to whom they sent prayers. Probably to St. Nicolas... He takes care of the people... So listen, lass, tomorrow morning the wife saw her daughter again. She ran to the house, but when she was away the girl died. He (the master of the forest) returned the girl to the bathhouse. Back. To the bathhouse.

<And the dog was the master of the forest?>

Right you are. He tortured her all night long and she died. But where should they look for her if God has not made it in his own way for them to know where she was taken to?<sup>16</sup>

### 1. Communicative level of the folklore interview

**Speaker 1:** informant (actual storyteller) – Anna Andriyanovna Fedoseyeva.

*I've heard this story myself. From the father <father of the story's heroine> (Father has built the hospital here. It is still standing on the high bank right near the quay).*

**Addressee 1:** the folklorist (interviewer) – Elena Machinova. Anna Andriyanovna calls her **lass**. In the North-Western Russia such reference is used in communication between women of equal status (whether talking with younger women or women of the same age).

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<sup>16</sup> Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Vin19–1. Recorded from Anna Andriyanovna Fedoseyeva, born in 1907, in the Vinogradovsky district of the Arkhangel region, in 1990 by Elena Makhinova.

If it had happened, say, on Whitsunday they could have just gone to Kurjumeni church... So they rode in the same direction but to three churches and hold services there, **lass**. I do not know, in whose honor or to whom they sent prayers. Probably to St. Nicolas... He takes care of the people... So listen, **lass**, tomorrow morning the wife saw her daughter again.

## 2. Communicative level of the story told in the past

**Speaker 2: primary storyteller**, from whom Anna Andriyanovna, the actual speaker, has heard the story.

The opinion of the primary storyteller is the leading one in the text. The communication participants are identified from his point of view: “girl”/“daughter”, “son of marriageable age”, “wife”.

I had a **daughter**, – he said, –she was a bride. And a **son of marriageable age**. The son, – he said, –went to collect some stacked hay.

**Addressee 2:** Anna Andriyanovna, the one who has heard this story.

## 3. Communicative level of the participants of the mythological story

On this level Anna Andriyanovna cites those named by the event participants in their dialogues with each other, recollected by the primary storyteller “as are”. So “the wife” of the primary storyteller refers to her mother-in-law as “mother”. Mother-in-law is the person who sent the girl to the master of the forest.

**Speaker 3:** the wife of the primary storyteller.

**Addressee 3:** her mother-in-law, called “mother” (according to tradition in Russian families daughter-in-law has to call her mother-in-law and father-in-law “mother” and “father”).

“Hey, **mother**, – she said, – our... (she call her daughter by name)... where is she? – she said”...

#### 4. Communicative level of supposed dialogues

On this level we see how communications are described. In this case, the primary narrator was not a witness but he was sure that they took place. The communicative level of supposed dialogues becomes evident in the situation of the recommended prayer services to St. Nicolas. There is no cited speech. The narrative is conducted in a third person as a summary, in a conditional mood.

**Speakers 4: *they*** (indefinite relatives), who “*rode to three churches and hold services there*”.

**Addressees 3:** unnamed priests, who “*hold services there*”.

For example, **they** would go to Trinity, go to Trinity and there was a church in Kurumeni. Well, on this side, they would go to three churches. So they rode to three churches and attended services there. I do not know, in whose honor or to whom they sent prayers. Probably to St. Nicolas...

Thus in the interview the narrator tells the folklorist that she has heard the story from the father of the girl who got into trouble and died after a night in the cold bathhouse following a conflict with her grandmother. The girl’s mother and brother also took part in the events as they saw the girl “riding to the forest on the back of the dog”. Those two are the actual witnesses of the supernatural encounter, though the voice of the mother is mainly heard in the story. The mother blames her mother-in-law for damning her granddaughter to hell. One of the most popular of Russian damnation/abuse formulas sounds like an imperative: “May you be taken by the forest spirit” (*Ponesi tebja leshij*). This formula is a speech taboo in Russian village culture, especially when addressing children. A curse pronounced by mother or grandmother aloud has,

according to popular beliefs, a special force.<sup>17</sup> Mother and father turn for help to old women who know the magical antidote for the curse. The elder women condemn the angry grandmother and give advice about how to save the girl from the spell. After they have ordered three simultaneous services of St. Nicholas in three churches the girl is found, but it is too late – she has been tortured to death by the master of the forest. The retelling of the story helps to understand the circumstances better but neutralizes the passions which fill the story.

I have written that legends of the supernatural and other texts of fabulous prose are subjects of a causal type.<sup>18</sup> The stories are of cause-and-effect type. Frequently the critical events, events of personal experience are interpreted by the storytellers through encounter with supernatural forces. Such supernatural or, to put it stronger, “demonological” implications are incorporated into sound, visual and tactile impressions of those who participated in the encounter. Participants of a “supernatural” event hear groans and crying (of a domestic spirit) or songs of a forest spirit, see their relatives’ doubles (in the image of which a domestic spirits appear), feel the touch and pressure of (of a domestic spirit) during the night. All these inexplicable impressions are interpreted as signs of spirits. However, all signs are associated (precede or accompany) with important events in the life of the participants. The triggers for sensitivity to supernatural signs are rather often caused by crisis, disruptions of the normal course of life, such as loss of relatives and property, serious diseases, recoveries from illnesses, etc. In the above-mentioned story the critical trigger was the conflict between the strict grandmother who saw her granddaughter with a young man in a public place, and the

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<sup>17</sup> Plot AI 7a «The Leshij takes away the damned, given to him with an incautious word: the mother sends “to leshij” (“to hell”) the child (husband – wife), into the forest» from the «Index of plots-motifs of mythological stories» by V.P. Zinovjev (ZINOV'EV 1985).

<sup>18</sup> VESELOVA 2000; 2008.

granddaughter with involvement of the daughter-in-law (the girl's mother).

The example was recorded from the seventy-four year old woman living in a village Monastyrskaya from Vologda region. In this story a young mother at night felt a heavy hand on her and that this hand was pulling away her newborn child from her. She jumped up from fear and cried. Her mother-in-law, the child's grandmother, heard her daughter-in-law cry. After asking about the incident, she explained the feelings experienced by her daughter-in-law: that the domestic spirit (he is not called in the story, but is denoted by the pronouns "he") did not like that the newborn was not "installed" – was not introduced to the spirit. The narrator is the very child who was "pulled" by the spirit. She retells her mother's story, which she has heard many times. Formally, the narrator was a participant in the events, but a very passive participant. Her mother and grandmother are the real actors of the event. Formally, the events must be told as a story in the third person. However, this type of stories is the form of incorporation the third person experience (of meeting the supernatural) into one's own experience and speech. In the recorded narrative we hear replicas of the dialogue between the storyteller's mother and her wise grandmother.

Now nothing is being done, you know. God knows what is true, what is not true. It is unknown. My mother – I was born in Sidorovo village, she is from Sidorovo. /.../ So she sleeps (before, after all, they slept on palliase, there were no beds, nothing). She told all the time: here, she says, I am sleeping, and I am near her breast at her place on the mattress, here, she says, through me, to me, she says, someone has laid down and through me, she says, and pulls you away. And the hand, she says, is heavy. I, she says, got scared, jumped up, said, roared. Well, my father had a mother, well, my grandmother, so she heard that she was crying... She said she got the lamp, and asks, but, she says – there was no master, well, my father – she says, through me and

not to you, she says, lay down, not on your side, but through me, she says, pulls you away. I, she says, and said: "Mother" – after all, they called mother before – mother, she says. She asks: "What are you crying about?" And she says: "Mother, someone comes to me, says she, lay down, so through me, she says, a hand – a heavy, heavy hand – says, says, is pulling Raisku, me, away. Well. She says: "And you, she says, the girl, came, did you install her?" After all, she did not. So on the second day in the morning I went to install me.

<That is, you also needed – a child...>

Yes, yes, yes, and she went to install me. After all, as she installed, no one came. Here, apparently, it was necessary to install. I was born in Sidorovo. They brought me from there and did not install me, apparently.

<He didn't like it, did he?>

And he, apparently, did not like that I was not installed. You see, you can see there is some kind of force, something. Well, but I've heard from my mother more than once.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, each subsequent narration builds up a referent event, and the narrative receives its "final" forms after repeated reproduction. The narratives that we record in the "field" are probably not the same as they were in the act of the first story. But the stories that we have, by their very composition present the initial situation: when uncertainty was directly given to consciousness and when it was "experienced" in communication. The supernatural experience is conserved in dialogue form of narrative.

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<sup>19</sup> Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Syam19–67. Recorded on July 11, 2006 in the village of Monastyrskaya, Syamzhensky District, Vologda Region. from Raisa Alexandrovna Fatieva (born in 1932 in Sidorovo) by A.V. Stepanov.



The very composition of the stories stored in the Folklore Archive represents the original situation when the mind is facing uncertainty and verbalizes it through communication and reflection. That is how "experience is translated into language", as Bill Ellis describes it.

"We can recognize five such forms in the typical life of a legend.

- 1) In its first and most transient state, it can provide an individual with convenient language to identify an uncanny event or a social stress; it names a marginal experience.
- 2) Second, it shares this experience, in the form of words, with others, who evaluate and comment on it; it translates marginality into language.
- 3) Third, with the help of this evaluation and existing tradition, the performer reduces idiosyncratic elements in the narrative to good form. The resulting performance can be repeated at will to convince or entertain; it becomes a finished narrative.
- 4) Fourth, the story no longer requires performance, but instead remains a familiar part of the group's knowledge; it becomes a metonym, a kernel narrative, an inside password.
- 5) Fifth, as it decays farther from its original energy, it becomes dormant. Known but no longer relevant, it circulates only in parodic or summary form; it is no longer a legend but a legend report.

The legend is a polyform genre whose stages equally reflect humans' need to define, name, and share every part of their world and every margin of their experience. All those stages are equally legend, even when they differ in function and form".<sup>20</sup>

The listeners' attention is caught due to the rich vocabulary of effects in the stories. Strange sounds, sensations and visions

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<sup>20</sup> ELLIS 1989, 50.

lead to the states of mind which can be described as “emotives” (the words *terrified, frightened, devastated, furious, surprised, feeling pity, feeling seek at heart* are often used in the studied interviews). The range of descriptions of body reactions is also abundant. Attempts to describe emotional reaction accurately prove the habit of being attentive to one’s own feelings and the feelings of the close ones. Talking about emotions also means feeling them, which in its turn reinforces an emotional, empathetic community.

Even more important is the fact that almost every story contains a thorough description of the background for development of effects which influence the eyewitnesses. The narrators clearly state their own personal critical experience as well as the experience of their close relatives. Usually they talk about being worried for the people nearest and dearest to them, about surviving personal losses and serious illnesses, and about challenging the boundaries in exploration of spaces and fortunes. Instead of the usual analysis of legends through the filter of supernatural characters, we would like to focus our attention not only on the direct narrators but on the speakers whom they cite – on those who had searched for and found the words to describe their states of mind, emotions and personal crises, on those who translated their experience into the language of a narrative. The high emotional level of the stories is supported by polyphony of storytelling, the technique of “squeezing” several performances within a single performance. In their course, people demonstrate their emotions using narration models offered by culture as the instruments of strong feelings. The essence of the oral activity lies in the “living through” the emotional experience.

In every story we hear the chorus of different voices: of witnesses, interpreters, advisers – co-participants in events and experience. In the traditional ways of presenting accounts, experience is embodied in dialogue, an exchange of remarks. We come across the traces of such verbal participation in quoted

speech of other people in the transcribed stories. We may suggest that the more literary, formal and written a culture becomes, the fewer number of voices is heard in performance and the more narrator-concentrated and the less polyphonic is the story.

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