
The role of the bear in the Russian folk tale: Personage, plot type, and behavioural scenarios

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Abstract: Taking four genres as examples, this paper tracks the realisation of the bear image in the system of Russian folk tale characters. The bear as a tale character is portrayed through a set of capacities defined by the genre convention of the Russian folk tale and the communicative aims of the narrators. So, the bear character is composed of a vast range of conventions. It seems evident that the folk tale as an oral activity and as a special interaction of the narrator with the audience is a presentation of methods of acting in various life circumstances and the very means of influencing the listeners. Different folk tale genres demonstrate the various scenarios of such actions. Forty-six plots with a bear as a character (with multiple records in Russian) have been categorised into plot types. All plots were reviewed from the point of view of the role performed by the bear in each genre.

The characters of the Russian folk tale form a “pantheon” in which the same animals and human beings dwell in different plots. According to the frequency of word usage as recorded in the general glossary of the COMPARATIVE INDEX OF PLOTS OF EAST-SLAVIC FOLK TALES (referred to as CIP hereafter), this pantheon embraces the bear, the fox, the rooster, the cat and the wolf, together with the *muzhik* (the Russian peasant) and the *baba* (the Russian peasant woman), along with the *tsar* and his daughter *tsarevna* (the bride), the soldier, the *barin* (landlord) and the fool (cf. CIP). The multiple reference frequency of these actors in folk tales makes the task of their general characterisation rather complicated. The point is that in various folk tale genres, and even in the tales performed by one narrator, the characters appear in various incarnations depending on the situation – as a trickster or the victim of tricksters, as a protagonist and as an antagonist and donor.

In my article, I would like to set the objective of describing the bear as a tale character through a set of capacities defined by the genre convention of the Russian folk tale and the communicative aims of the narrators. Such an approach represents each folk tale genre as a selection of poetic modes and communicative capabilities, which each narrator has learned and is accustomed to using in his/her way.

First of all, the telling of folk tales is still one of the most common and straightforward folklore performances in Russian cultural practice. Tales are typical bedtime reading for children by their parents, tale plots are staged as plays by both professional and amateur companies, and they are shot as feature and animation films. But most important is the fact that folk tales are still being orally narrated. For many years, during our field studies in the villages of the Russian North (mainly in the Vologda and Arkhangelsk regions) as well as in the northwestern Russian cities and towns, we

have been recording oral folk tales and traditional anecdotes of a similar nature told by children and adults with different life experiences (education, career, family status). By storing the audio and video recordings of multiple folk tale versions as produced by our informants, we are trying to find out who was performing folk tales and when and to whom they were (or are) being performed.

I believe that tale narration remains the current symbolic practice in modern Russia, not because it relates to the storage and transfer of “worthy” archaic knowledge from one generation to another, but because I think that through the performance of folk tale plots the narrators (both male and female) continue to solve their actual communication problems. Learning narrative skills goes hand in hand with mastering a range of behavioural tactics and a wider *ethos*. Following G. Bateson, I understand *ethos* as a style of life of a separate culture defined by the value system, temperament, and personality of individuals acting as culture-bearers (BATESON 2000). In folklore studies, it is generally accepted that folk tale (fictional) prose differs from non-fiction prose by the narrator’s and the audience’s convention of non-reliability of the narrated events (PROPP 1984, 54). However, it seems evident that folk tale content is not about the imaginary events of an imaginary life of a protagonist who has never existed, but the proclaiming and assertion of the tactics of dwelling in real life, as well as the ethical basis of such tactics and the choice of them.

The storyteller shares with her/his audience modes of action in various circumstances known to her/him and also provides justification for selecting this or that mode. The listeners of the folk tale react to the offered modes of action by either sharing or condemning them, which means they identify proposed tactics and make them the matter of their discussion. In 2017, at Ust-Kyma village in the Arkhangelsk region, we recorded a one-hour story-telling performance by Nina Fyodorovna Klimova. She had heard these tales from her grandmother (born approximately in 1894), who told stories in the evenings to her small granddaughters before they fell asleep: “She knew a lot of tales. Like, we read a tale at first, and then she re-told it to us. But she painted them in another colour, if you see what I mean”¹ (DURAKOVA 2017, 2). Nina Fyodorovna perceived such tales as horror stories: “She knew how to scare us ...”; however, it was probably one of the reasons that young Nina remembered the tales so well “because I was petrified”.

Following Michel de Certeau’s concept, I assume that narrating serves the task of verbalising the *modi operandi* and the way of thinking in real life: “Tales and legends seem to have the same role. They are deployed, like games, in a space outside of and isolated from daily competition, that of the past, the marvelous, the original. In that space can thus be revealed, dressed as gods or heroes, the models of good or bad ruses that can be used every day. Actions, not truths are recounted” (DE CERTEAU 1984, 23).

Folk tales as an oral activity and as a special interaction of the narrator with his/her audience are not only a description of events happening in an imaginary world. They are also a presentation of methods of acting in various life circumstances and the means of influencing the listeners. Different folk tale genres or, to be more exact, folk tale plot patterns, demonstrate various methods of such actions.

In Russian folklore studies, folk tale genres are generally classified as follows: *cumulative tales*, *animal tales*, *trickster tales*, *tall tales* (false stories), and *fairy tales* (PROPP 1976, 47). Folk tale genres are based on key composition patterns:

1 All translations from Russian into English in this text by the author.

- the cumulative pattern² in cumulative tales;
- the trickster's tricks pattern in trickster and animal tales;³
- the pattern with a sequence of functions, from deficit/damage to their elimination, as defined by V. Ya. PROPP (1928), is a composition unit with an act or deed of the tale character; a specific pattern for fairy tales;⁴
- the pattern which is based on the formula of the impossible constitutes the composition of tall tales.

Reflecting on composition/plot pattern typology from the point of view of their origin and importance, not only for narrative practices but for the culture in its entirety, Yu. M. LOTMAN (1992, 242) comes to the following conclusion: "The plot is a powerful weapon for life comprehension. Only due to the creation of the narrative forms of art has a man learned to identify the plot-like aspect of the reality, to dismember a non-discreet stream of events into several discreet units, linking them with certain meanings (i.e. semantic interpretation) and organizing them in consecutive orderly chains (i.e. syntagmatic interpretation). The accentuation of events as discrete units in the plot and attributing certain meanings to them, on the one hand, as well as providing them with definitive timely, causative-consecutive, and any other sequences, on the other hand, form the essence of a plot. [...] The more a man's behavior acquires features of liberty as compared to the automaticity of genetic programs, the more important it is for the man to build the plots of events and behavior. [...] When people create text with plots, they learn to identify plots in real life and thus interpret life for themselves". For me, the most important provisions are the following: First, the plots of imaginative narratives are directly linked to an understanding of the plots of life, second, the identification of the plots in life is both a creative and a reflexive process, and third, people learn to divide and identify. It is also significant that each person has to undergo the whole process of learning. Folk tales are the training that enables the comprehension of the plots in one's own life and the awareness of behavioural scenarios that are acceptable to the culture.

The earning of competencies presented in folk tales takes place step-by-step. A schematic description of this process assumes an almost unconscious familiarisation with the very early childhood tales of the cumulative type. Our interlocutors often inform us that they used to tell their children cumulative tales about animals. The next are the tales about already-known animal protagonists with trickster-type plots. The comprehension of fairy tale plots requires developed competencies of the listeners as, in any fairy tale plot, the journey from wrecking to elimination embraces both cumulative and trickster elements. Our next step will be the analysis of roles attributed by narrators to the bear protagonist in Russian folk tales. Also, we will try to find out which modes of acting in a weak or a strong position this character embodies.

The materials for my analysis come from various sources. First, statistics for each type of Russian folk tale with a bear-protagonist or bear character can be found in the CIP, which comprises all published folk tales in Russian up until the beginning of the 1970s. Based on this material, we will define the plot types in which we can most frequently meet the bear.

- 2 Folk tales in which the plot is built on the creation of a consecutive chain of bodies, deeds, meetings and acquisitions and which end with the destruction of the created chain. The hierarchies, orders and relations are established in these plot patterns, while the performance versions may vary with a good or bad ending for the protagonist.
- 3 In Russian trickster tales, peasants always deceive the landlord, gypsies very often deceive peasants, fools usually deceive normal people, and wives often deceive husbands.
- 4 Thus, a fairy tale is "a genre of tales, which begins with inflicting some harm or damage (kidnapping, exile, etc.) or in which a deficit or desire to possess something (a tsar sends his son to fetch a firebird) is developed through exiling the protagonist away from home with a mission, him meeting a donor who gives him a magic device or a helper to find and acquire the target of the search. Further, the tale sequence embraces a combat with an enemy (snake-fighting as the most important one), return and pursuit" (PROPP 1928, 22).

Second, another source of material in the form of modern folk tale records from the end of the 1970s until the present is the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg University. For the last 40 years, this archive has been replenished by sound recordings and their transcriptions with context links to the data about narrators, the history of their repertoire and narration circumstances. We also use research publications of folk tales made during the last decades as auxiliary material. Modern folklore materials provide a source for the assessment of the degree of popularity of the bear character in present-day Russian tales.

The editors of the almanac “Russian Bear: History, Semiotics, Politics”, Oleg Riabov and Andrzej de Lazari, declared in the introduction: “The bear in Russia is more than a bear – especially nowadays when it is transformed into the national symbol, being widely used by specialists in political technologies, journalists and marketing experts. It also functions as an allegory of Russia in foreign cultures, occupying an important place in the system of images, symbols, metaphors with a strong effect on the attitude towards Russia and the Russians” (RIABOV/DE LAZARI 2012, 5). Taking into account the relevance of the Russian bear metaphor for our partners in international communication, in this article we are yet mostly interested in the meaning of this metaphor strictly within Russian culture. By analysing the folk tales that folklorists have recorded during the last 20 decades, we will try to understand which types of bear characters are popular in Russia and what sorts of underlying values and hierarchies they represent.

We find 97 folk tale plots with the word “bear” in the glossary of the CIP.⁵ Thirty-one plots out of 97 have variants only in the Ukrainian and Belorussian records, and 16 have only one recorded version, so they do not meet the repeatability criteria. Three more plots are recorded by reference to the words “female bear”. Three of four cases mentioning “bear cubs” include “cub accompanies its mother” (female bear), and there is one more where bear cubs are victims of the fox. Thus we have selected 46 plots with multiple records in Russian for our analysis. All plots have been attributed by plot pattern and further reviewed from the point of view of the role performed by the bear in each genre: tall tales, cumulative tales, trickster tales and fairy tales. Any further references to the bear in brief plot descriptions are rendered with the pronoun “he” in all its forms, unless otherwise specified, due to the male bear being the target of the study and the most common character among all gender and age bear groups.

Tall tales (also known as false stories) remain distanced from other folk tale genres. Their common feature is the fictitious element that unites this type with the rest of the folk tale types. However, in tall tales, the fictitious is prevalent. As compared with other folk tale genres, the tall tales are rather weakly organised in the plot-building aspect. Mostly, the tall tales are created not as a sequence of events but as a string-like arrangement of the same rhetorical technique – the so-called “formulas of the impossible”. In the CIP only one tall tale with a bear as its character is marked in the glossary – it is called “The Miracle of Miracles”.⁶ Its content tells us what we shall NOT wait for the bear to do in the “normal” Russian folk tale. The bear flying high up is the “impossible formula”. In folklore poetic

5 For comparison, we give statistics on the most popular characters from the animal world in Russian fairy tales. According to the CIP, the leader in frequency is the wolf. The glossary contains references to 145 East Slavic fairy tale plots, of which 78 plots are known in the Russian material and 55 plots are recorded in a variety of variants. Also a popular Russian fairy tale character is the fox (112 East Slavic plots, 52 of which are recorded in Russian, 34 are presented repeatedly). Domestic animals are far behind in popularity. One of the most popular fairy tale characters – the rooster – is mentioned in only 31 East Slavic fairy tale plots, 14 of which are recorded in Russian, ten repeatedly. Thus, the bear is in the top three (the first place is for the wolf, the second for the fox) in terms of the participation of the animal character in Russian (and East Slavic) fairy tale plots.

6 CIP 1930C* = AA *1931. In “The Miracle of Miracles”, the sea is burning, a ship is running on seawater, a bear is flying high up in the sky, etc. Here and below: AA – reference to the corresponding number of the plot in the Andreev-Aarne index (ANDREEV/AARNE 1929), AT – reference to the corresponding number in the Aarne-Thompson index (AARNE/THOMPSON 1964).

birds can fly: from the real world to the other world, from winter to summer, from the home world to the big world called the “clean field”. At the same time, birds are a stable metaphor for women in folklore (BERNSHTAM 2003). Let us turn the poetic logic in the reverse direction. In the real world birds fly, and in the artistic imagination women are like birds. Bears fly in an extraordinary world and, even in the poetic, a bear is not like a bird; their imagery does not intersect. The tall tale, literally in two words, states that even in a fairy tale the correlation of the image of a bear with the categories of bird / feminine is impossible.

Now let us pay attention to the folk tales that are told to the younger audience, whom the narrators call “not so smart”. As I already mentioned, modern female narrators said that they had chosen cumulative tales for the youngest children. According to the CIP, the bear takes part in six cumulative plots: “Fly’s Chamber”,⁷ “Roly-Poly”,⁸ “No Goat with Nuts”,⁹ “Bear on Lime Leg”,¹⁰ “Song of a Wolf (Bear)”¹¹ and “Beasts in a Winter Hut”.¹² Judging by the quantity of plots with the bear as a character, the cumulative tales are the less numerous among all genres; however, judging by the number of recorded versions (128 units, recorded in CIP, without taking into account the archived and modern materials), they are quite compatible with fairy tales. The proportion between the “classical” (before the 1970s) and modern (from the 1970s until present) tales is demonstrated by records of the folk tale “Bear on Lime Leg”; the plot is known in 23 “classical” and 30 modern recorded versions. So it is evident that the cumulative tale plots are still quite popular.

In cumulative tales, for example, in “Fly’s Chamber” (CIP 283B* = AA *282 B), the plot is arranged as a sequence of connected links. Each link represents an arrival at the fly’s house of a new insect or beast. Every new visitor is of bigger shape and he/she makes acquaintance with the house inhabitants. Generally, in a cumulative tale, the plot ends by breaking or disrupting the logical chain of events. In the series of visits to the fly’s house, the last arrival becomes fatal. The bear is the largest animal, he cannot get into the chamber, sits on the house and destroys it. This plot is known to the majority of Russian-speaking audiences via oral performances (the plot is quite simple for memorisation due to the formalised nicknames of the characters) or via listening to children’s books being read to the children by their parents. The bear semantics in the tales with the simplest plots – the cumulative tales – are evident at first sight – the bear is the largest animal, so he is the most dangerous. However, in the popular “Kolobok (Roly-Poly)” plot, in which Kolobok (a round cookie that has come to life and run away from the old man and his wife) encounters the hare, the wolf, the bear and the fox, this logic does not work. Kolobok manages to escape from the first three animals, but the smaller, female fox turns out to be the most dangerous. Because of her cunning she is the one who eats Kolobok in the end.

The folk tale “Bear on Lime Leg” (CIP 161A* = AA *161 = AT 163B*) is unique among the cumulative tales, because the bear acts here as a protagonist. This plot has been identified only in East Slavic materials in relation to other national Slavic and European corpora of tales. In the collection

7 “Fly’s Chamber”: The fly, the mouse, the hare, the fox, the bear go into a mitten (a wagon); the bear comes in last and crushes them all. CIP 283B* = AA *282; 21 versions.

8 “Kolobok (Roly-Poly)”: A bread/cookie of a round shape (*kolobok*) runs away from the old man, the old woman, the wolf, the bear, etc. CIP 2025 = AA *296; 15 versions.

9 “No Goat with Nuts”: The nanny-goat fails to come back from the forest, so the wolves and then the bear are sent to fetch her back; the goat returns safely in the end. CIP 2015; 24 versions.

10 “Bear on Lime Leg”: The bear comes to the house of an old man and his wife for his axed paw, singing a song in which the bear asks them to return his paw: 366A*. CIP 161A* = AA *161 = AT 163B*; 23 versions + 30 modern interpretations.

11 “Song of a Wolf” (“Bear” less frequent): The wolf entices animals (sheep, hen, heifer) from the old men by his song and tries to eat the old man’s wife (to steal his granddaughter). CIP 163 = AA *162; 23 versions.

12 “Beasts in a (Winter) Hut”: The ox, the boar and the rooster drive away the wolf (bear, robbers), who tries/try to enter into their house. 130A – Animals built a house; 130B – Animals run to the woods to save their lives; CIP 130, 130A, 130B = AA 130).

of folk tales recorded over the last decades and stored in the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, it is one of the most popular. In the Vologda collection of the archive, there are 139 tales (35 plots or contaminations), and nine of them are the versions of the “Bear on Lime Leg” pattern. Eight tales have been performed by women and one by a man. Two out of eight female narrators informed us that they had learned the tale from their grandfather or father,¹³ who often went to the forest hunting and told their children and grandchildren the stories based on his experience, mixing truth and lies. So, in the middle of the 20th century, this tale was narrated both by men and women, while at the end of the 20th century – when tales were recorded by folklore scientists – the narration of tales had become mostly the women’s practice.

The tale’s storyline is as follows: a *baba* / a *starukha* (a middle aged /an old peasant woman) sends her *muzhik* / *starik* (a peasant man / an old man) to the forest to get meat from the bear’s body. The hunter axes away one of the paws of a sleeping male bear. The bear wakes up and makes a leg out of lime wood instead of the lost paw (as a result the bear has three paws and one lime leg). Then the bear goes to the village looking for his paw singing a threatening song (accusing the old woman of using his paw in her household routine). The old man and his wife hide from the bear in their *izba* (cottage) or start to bargain with him. The performers say that the tale can have a bad (the bear eats the old man and his wife) or a happy end. The happy end is considered preferable when the story is narrated to the smallest children.

The bear’s threatening song consists of three parts and a final exclamation: “Om nom, I’ll eat you!”. In the first part of the song, the bear addresses his lime leg: “Screech, my leg, screech, screech my lime (birch) leg”. In the second part of his song, the bear recites various types of dwelling places (*selo* [a large village with a church] and *derevnja* [a small one with only a chapel]), where “normal” inhabitants sleep, as opposed to the guilty (old) woman who is not sleeping: “All villages sleep, both big and small, only one woman is awake”. The song’s third part accuses the old lady of her use of the bear’s paw: “She sits on my skin, she sucks my flesh. I’ll eat her the moment I see her! Om nom!”.¹⁴ The Vologda versions of the plot have one more peculiar feature; in them, the old man and his wife play “hide-and-seek” with the bear. In the majority of variants, the old couple hides in the stove leaving a trap for the bear by opening the cellar’s trapdoor on the floor. The Russian stove (*russkaja pech*) occupies the central place in the Russian village house – it heats the inside space, food is cooked in it, water is heated and boiled there, people sleep on it, get warm, and dry their garments and food stores. However, an adult can hide inside the Russian stove only if it has been specially built with a high arch and sufficient inner space. This type of stove is found only in areas where bathing and washing inside stoves is a habit. It is worth mentioning that the area where the plot of the “Bear on Lime Leg” is most common, according to A. B. Ostrovskiy, – the Higher Volga region and the Vologda region (OSTROVSKIY 1990) – coincides with the locations where there is a custom to wash in the stove. That is how A. V. Stepanov describes this hygienic and health-preserving habit: “The practice of washing, bathing, and steam-bathing in the Russian stove with an oven was quite common in the Russian North together with the ‘bathing tradition’. Washing in the stove is related to the so-called Rostov-Suzdal colonisation of northern territories (by people from Rostov Velikiy and Suzdal regions, which were the central areas of Russia in the 10th to 17th centuries and still are). The height of the stove arch in regions where it was used for bathing was particularly high. People bathed in stoves

13 Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Vash 16-14. Recorded from Polina Alexandrovna Gorodnichnaya (born in 1928), in the village of Bereznik at the Roskomsky village community of Vashkinsky District in Vologda Region on 14.07.2002 by O. I. Alimova and E. E. Samoylova.

14 Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Syam 16-24. Recorded from Valentina Efimovna Voronova (born in 1928 in the village of Bor) in the village of Makarovskaya at the Dvinitkiy village council of Syamzhenskiy District in the Vologda Region on 30.07.2006 by Yu. Yu. Marinicheva.

when these had become cool enough after fuelling and the stovepipe had already been closed. One would have to go into the stove and leave it with one's head first. People bathed sitting with their feet directed towards the stove opening. The damper could be closed to save the heat. Newborn children of up to 40 days of age could also have been washed in the following family tradition: The grandmother (a mother-in-law or a healer) got into the stove, the mother handed her the baby, who was placed on the straightened legs of the woman in the stove with its head to the feet of the woman. After washing, the grandmother handed the baby back to mother with its head first" (STEPANOV [no date]).

From the recordings of oral performances of this tale in circumstances close to natural ones (narration for grandchildren in the presence of the recorders, or for the recorders who were in the same age group as the performer's grandchildren), it becomes evident that the narrators did not take any pains to accurately reproduce the twists and turns in the plot, but had the primary objective of frightening the audience or maintaining its closest attention. Raisa Fyodorovna Moskovtseva told us the tale about the bear¹⁵ several times and her story always ended unexpectedly; either by pinching the listener's side at the end of the bear's song or by discourse about the material of the bear paw prosthesis or by reminiscences of the tale being performed by her grandmother. In the latter case, the narrator added the grandmother's "horror" riddles ("Where is the bear's eye in the room?" [a knot in the wood of a floorboard], "Where is the bear paw in our house?" [the broom]). The difference in the performances of the same plot demonstrates the secondary role of the plot for a narrator. The plot is just a pre-requisite for a storytelling, and the performer is free to improvise based on the storyline, seeking her/his own communicative goals.

Anna Vasilyevna Voronicheva, when narrating the tale, performed the bear's threatening song three times.¹⁶ However, in her performance the reminiscences of her reaction as a small girl to the singing of her grandmother in the "horrifying" bear voice ("All of us: 'Oh, oh, oh, will he really eat us?'" ; "All of us: 'Oh, how terrible!!!'") are more important than any variances in the tale composition. Just like other narrators, A. V. Voronicheva recollects the skills and the tricks of performers from whom she has learned the tale, such as intonations, gestures, movements and interposition with the listeners (sitting together on a stove). When talking about her fear in the course of listening to the tale, Anna Vasilyevna also remembers with relief the sense of the audience's common joy when the old couple were victorious over the bear. In one of the archived tale versions, the theme of the old man and his wife hiding is replaced by the description of the ongoing approach of the bear – past the window, through the door, to the stove and the berth, where the old woman lies in the tale, but also where the children are listening to the performer. The narrators describe the circumstances at the time of the tale-telling as sitting on the Russian stove (the one to which "the bear is approaching") before bedtime or near the stove in the course of common labour activities in the form of spinning. For the time being, we shall not pay too much attention to the fact that the bear in the tale threatens the old woman, though his paw has been axed by the hunter. The fact that the addressee of the bear's song-threat is the woman, and that the main plot interactions take place between the bear and her, leads us to assume that the basic character relations here are developing between the woman and the bear. How these relationships are presented in fairy tales, we will see later. Now we have all the evidence to suggest that performers of the "Bear on Lime Leg" plot insisted on reproducing a suspense effect, well known to them since their childhood. The suspense is created by dwelling on the borders

15 Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Syam 16-24. Recorded from Raisa Fyodorovna Moskovtseva (born in 1932 in the village of Martyanikha) in the village of Goluzino at the Goluzinskiy village council of Syamzhenskiy District in Vologda Region on 15.07.2005 by S. B. Adonyeva and I. S. Veselova.

16 Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Kir 16-3. Recorded from Anna Vasilyevna Voronicheva (born in 1924 in the village of Uloma) in the village of Ivanov Bor at the Ivanovoborskiy village council in the Kirillovskiy District in the Vologda Region on 20.07.2006 by M. D. Karmanova.

between the safe and the horrible. Folk tales unlock these borders on the levels of composition, semantics, pragmatics, and perception. First, a folk tale is embedded into a chain of stories in such a way as to conceal the difference between fact and fiction (for example, the hunters-storytellers mixed the tale performance with true stories of their own forest experience). Second, the folk tale's imaginary universe provides for the mutual crossing of the borders between human beings and the bear: greed and self-interest bring the hunter to the forest for easy loot, the bear takes revenge for the harm done by coming to the man's own house (in the village). Third, the very place of the tale performance coincides with its poetic universe (village, house, stove). Fourth, the narrator partially becomes the bear with the horrible singing voice and with three paws and one lime leg, who pinches the listener's side "on behalf of the bear". The suspense accumulates and intensifies due to the narration taking place at the time when the audience is caught between wakefulness and sleep, by the travelling of the bear from the forest to the village, the non-obvious frontiers between facts and fiction, the transition from singing to prosaic utterance and back, the intonation change from the "frightening" singing voice back to normal speech. Every feature helps to create and maintain the borderline condition of the audience throughout the performance. The memory of the received impression remained intact from childhood to old age. Former listeners remember the growing fear from the approach of the singing bear on a screeching artificial leg, the joy when he is overcome, or the horror of imminent death (depending on the tale finale selected by the performer in each case).

So, the number of plots of the cumulative tales with the bear among its characters is limited but the number of records is quite impressive, confirming the fact that the bear was easily identifiable and popular. The "Bear on Lime Leg" is the most common one and helps the narrator to teach his audience how to act in the atmosphere of suspense between the threat of perishing and the chance of rescue. The bear becomes a source of fear, which is realistic for those who live in a village near the forest and know the stories about real animals.

Now we move on to the analysis of the next type of plot – with the trickster and his victim. In trickster tales, where there is a competition between a cunning person and the victims of his/her deception, the bear as a character has a profoundly other nature. The CIP contains references to 34 plots that we identified as trickster's – based on cunning tricks in which the bear plays at least some role. In twelve plots out of 34, the tricksters (usually peasants) use the bear or mimic the bear to frighten their victims and obtain from them the desired object. In these plots, the bear becomes a tool in the hands of a "smooth operator". Trickster use the habitual (according to life experience and collections of fairy tales) fear of a bear in a trick with "false danger".

In 22 plots, the bear acts as a full partner in competitions and tournaments that occur in the folk tale. However, the plots of trickster tales do not indicate the winner in advance. The trick/tale outcome depends on the balance of power and the circumstances in which the trick is played. For example, in household folk tales, where the actors are a peasant vs. his wife or a peasant vs. a fox, the deceiver and his victim often swap roles. In the combat "peasant vs. the devil", the peasant will be victorious in most cases. Let us analyse the bear's chances of victory in the Russian trickster tales. In CIP 1030 – "Harvest Sharing"¹⁷ – the partners arrange who will get a particular part of the planted crop after harvesting. The trickster (the peasant or the bear) uses his knowledge about the edible part of each crop (the upper part for wheat and the roots for turnips). The trick outcome depends on the participants of the circle of negotiation. The bear has a chance of victory if his counterpart is the devil or the fox. If the bear is facing the peasant in these negotiations, he will lose. In three plots ("The Bear on a High Wagon" [CIP 16], "The Dog and the Wolf/Bear" [CIP 101], "The Huts Made of Bast and

17 CIP 1030: "Harvest Sharing". "I will get the upper part of the crop and you will get the roots", arranges the peasant (the bear) in his agreement with the devil (the fox), and they plant wheat; the next year, the upper part is promised to the devil, but, because turnips are planted, the devil is again outmaneuvered.

Ice” [CIP 43]),¹⁸ the bear enjoys a small chance of winning: mostly through successful collaboration with the dog (CIP 101) or with the rooster/tomcat (CIP 43). In 17 trickster plots, the bear loses the combat to the peasant (nine plots), to the peasant’s wife (two), to the fox (five), and to the devil (one). We can see that the peasant is the most common counterpart of the bear in the competition between them and that the bear cannot succeed. In two plots, when the peasant’s wife enters the scene she also manages to outsmart the bear. One episode of the woman’s victory is present even in an erotic tale¹⁹ in which the bear acts as an unlucky sexual partner of the woman (this plot had widely circulated in the form of the *lubok* pictures). Another plot about the woman’s victory looks similar to the “Bear on Lime Leg” plot (CIP 161A** = AA *160 I); it is called “The Bear and the Old Woman”.²⁰ Here, an old woman meets the bear by accident, and he threatens to eat her. The old woman promises to give some gifts to the bear in exchange for her life, naming them Strongie, Warmlie and Further-Feather. However, these gifts are not the names of valuable animals but false promises. The old woman plans to close the door with a *strong* lock, hide in the *warm* stove and escape any *further* revenge. In contrast to the “Bear on a Lime Leg” plot, the “Bear and the Old Woman” plot is distinguished by the absence of a repetitive bear song. In the plot of “The Bear and the Old Woman”, the repetition and development of the old woman’s trick comes to the fore. In five more plots, the bear falls victim to the fox’s tricks.

Thus, in the trickster tales, the bear is very rarely a winner. If he succeeds, he mostly acts as a tool in the hands of a more advanced actor (the peasant or the dog), or cooperates with a better player (the dog or the rooster). In cases of any open intellectual one-to-one combat (with the peasant, with his wife, or with the fox) the bear mostly loses.

In this article, we have not been able to track down who was the narrator of the tales about winning over the bear and to what audience they were performed. However, we may point out that trickster tales require developed narrative competencies from the audience – the narratees must know how to identify the actors’ interests and the cunning means of the deceiver. It looks like the trickster tales were told to listeners who were already familiar with the lessons taught by the cumulative tales. These establish the accepted order and hierarchy and they perform the function of marking the “strong” and “weak” positions in the social universe. As for the trickster tales, they teach how to behave in a world where one constantly finds oneself in a weak position. This suggestion comes from the development of the concepts of “tactical behaviour” introduced by Michel de Certeau, and the “weapons of the weak” made known by James Scott. Both de Certeau and Scott think that the “weapons of the weak”, being the means of the non-evident resistance of those who are being dominated, include gossiping, rumors and anecdotes about the mighty, as well as legends and tales in which a character who was originally weak wins at the end (DE CERTEAU 1984; SCOTT 1985). The trickster tales provide in their opinion both a description of the “weapons of the weak” and a vivid demonstration of utilising such weapons. Thus, any victory over the bear in tales provides a person with a chance of winning (however imaginary) over a horrible and dangerous partner. Everybody with experience of visiting the wilderness knows how dangerous the bear can be, so any success in an interaction with the “master of the forest” depends on the wits and skills of his counterpart.

18 CIP 16: “The Bear on a High Wagon”. He is taken by mistake for a priest (a general). Only two versions of this plot are known. – CIP 101: “The Dog and the Wolf (Bear)”. The wolf organises the kidnapping of a baby (a sheep) with the dog and lets the dog snatch it from him for the dog to get food from his master. – CIP 43: “The Huts Made of Bast and Ice”. The fox builds an ice hut for herself, while for the wolf (the bear, the hare) she builds a hut made of bast. In spring, the fox’s hut melts and she tries to get possession of the bast hut.

19 CIP 152C*: “The Bear and the Woman”. They wrestle after having come to an agreement that the bear shall bring the woman a hive full of honey if he occasionally tears something which belongs to her; the deceived and disgraced bear runs away.

20 CIP 161A** = AA *160 I: “The Bear and the Old Woman”. The old woman survives the encounter with the bear, promising him Strongie, Warmlie, and Further-Feather as ransom; then she interprets her promises in her favour.

The Russian trickster tales (with animal and human characters) create a variety of plots. We can see a range of cunning tricks to be used in situations when any direct stand for one's interests is not possible. Sound recordings of performances of such tales stored in the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University provide the evidence that the natural situation for trickster tales (or traditional anecdotes) narration is not only the performance by the elder to the younger, but rather the storytelling in a group of people of the same age sitting around a festive table or in any other informal circumstances. The archive contains several records of continuous performances of tales told in a row in a female company with such cross-cutting plots as "Lazy Wife" and "How Muzhik Taught His Wife". Despite the didactic titles, lazy wives in these tales turn out to be wiser and luckier than their husbands. The general response to the story about each successful trick was a burst of laughter, creating the effect of women's solidarity in resistance against the established forces, laws, and social/natural order. Regardless of the fact of who the winner is in each round of the tale – the wife or her husband, the old woman or the fox, the woman or the bear – the victory is never ultimate, and a smart trick will be highly appraised by the audience.

Finally, I would like to analyse the bear as a character in fairy tales, which are tales *par excellence*, i.e. they belong to the genre that first comes to the mind of any folklore specialist or native speaker when folk tales are mentioned. Most often, this type of tale ends with the victory of a protagonist, they contain magic and the action takes place "once upon a time" in an imaginary land.

There are four fairy tale plots with bear characters known in Russian folklore.²¹ The bear plays the main role – of the antagonist and the donor – in plots marked as CIP 480 = AA 480*B, *C and CIP 311. In these cases, the protagonists are girls of pre-marriageable age. These tales are considered metaphoric descriptions of the wedding trials and female initiation in Russian traditional culture. In plot CIP 311, three sisters come, one by one, to the hut in the woods; the elder sisters break the ban set by the master of the hut (and of the forest) and are punished, while the last and youngest one passes the test and in some versions becomes the bear's wife: "So she walked and walked and came to a hut. She enters the hut and sees the bear who is sitting there fuelling the stove. The bear says: 'Oh pretty lass, do some weaving for me, and if you fail I'll cut your head off.' She weaved and weaved and succeeded. So they started living together" (SIMINA 1975, text nos. 17, 91).

The girl's willingness for the marriage has been defined in the village culture not only by physiological but rather by social maturity. The latter, as T. A. Bernshtam proved, was related to the girl becoming skilled in "artful handicraft", which was the combination of spinning, weaving, sewing, embroidery, singing, and circle dancing (*khorovod*) with the girl's erotic capabilities (BERNSHTAM 1999). These particular skills are demonstrated by the brides in fairy tales. As for the studied plots, the testing is done not by the *tsar*, the *tsarina*, or the bridegroom, which are common trial arrangers

21 The plot titles below are cited with CIP reference numbers. Each plot title is followed by its description from the glossary and the number of versions recorded therein: CIP 480, "Stepmother and Stepdaughter". The stepdaughter is taken to the forest; Morozko (Baba Yaga the witch, the forest spirit [*leshii*], the wolf, the bear) tests the girl and rewards her (AA 480*B); the stepdaughter plays hide-and-seek with the bear, she is assisted by a mouse. 26 versions. – CIP 311: "Bear (Leshii, Sorcerer) and Three Sisters". The elder sisters violate the prohibition to enter a special room and are murdered; the younger sister resuscitates them, hides them, conceals her visit to the banned room, makes the killer take the sisters and then herself to their home, banning him from looking at the "gifts for parents" (flees, leaving a doll on her bed). 20 versions. – CIP 650A: "Ivan the Bear's Ear". A young man (the son of a bear in many cases) shows incredible strength (at a blacksmith's shop, in the forest), sometimes brings mischief (does damage) to his master, of which his master complains; the young man goes into exile, he accomplishes feats. 43 versions. – CIP 315: "The Beast's Milk". A sister (mother) conspires with her lover to kill a young man and sends him to fetch the milk of a female wolf, she-bear or lioness, pretending to be ill; binds him; the protagonist saves his life with the help of the beasts – wolf, bear or lion cubs; destroys his enemy, punishes the hypocrite sister (mother). 72 versions.

in fairy tales, but by the most dangerous of forest beasts (the bear, the wolf) or forest spirits (Morozko²², *leshiy*²³).

Folklorist Ivona Zhepnikovska, in her article “Bear in a Russian Fairy Tale”, asks why a bear, a wolf, or a forest owner act in a synonymous position as antagonists in both plots (CIP 480 = AA 480*B, *C and CIP 311). She writes: “The interchangeability of a bear and a wolf is explained by similar demonological concepts, including the ability to shape-shift, marriage and erotic symbolism. [...] Isomorphy of the bear and *leshiy* is predictable and can be explained by their genetic relationship. The bear is *leshiy*’s prototype [...], because the cult of the forces of nature, embodied in *leshiy*, among others, has been preceded by the cult of totems” (ZHEPNIKOVSKA 2012, 63). She links the mythological sources of folk tales with a totemic cult. The bear, the *leshiy* and the wolf are, in her opinion, metaphoric “ritual specialists” in a girl’s *rites de passage*. The girl who passes the test, in which her life is at stake, receives her life back and a great dowry, while the one who fails perishes or gets rubbish instead of a dowry in more-merciful-to-the-audience versions. While, in CIP 311 tales, the trial lies in the sphere of the young girl’s handicraft and household skills, in the tale of the CIP 480 plot, *Morozko*, or the bear, is the trial-setter who checks the heroine’s patience (test by cold in the forest) or her ability to play the blind man’s buff game (*zhmurki*).²⁴ In I. Zhepnikovska’s opinion, “the idea of death and resurrection, perpetual regeneration and the repetition of life cycles forms the basis of the game of *zhmurki* – one of the key trials, which female protagonists of tales of ‘Stepmother and Stepdaughter’ type undergo because [...] ‘the blind looking for the sighted’ theme is a synonym of ‘the dead looking for the living’ topic. We observe another confirmation of the exclusive predetermination of the bear to fulfil the role of a creature opening the mystery of life and death to the fairy tale female protagonists and, which is also quite important, the interdependence of both phenomena” (ZHEPNIKOVSKA 2012, 70). Special relations between bears and women are captured in the Russian stories about encounters with the “master of the forest” (the name for both *leshiy* and the bear in the speech of past and modern country people living in the Russian North) as well as in Russian folk pictures such as “The Bear and the Peasant Woman” (LUBOK 1984, fig. 91), in which the plot of the above-mentioned erotic tale CIP 152 is presented. One such detailed story was recorded by Evgeniy Baranov in a Moscow tavern in the 1920s from a 60-year-old woman. It is a long story that starts with the forced concubinage of a countrywoman with a bear and the birth of an ugly boy from this affair (“with a human face but the arms and legs of a bear, and the bear’s ears as well”). After returning to the village, the woman begs for pardon from her husband and her landlord for her long absence and the birth of the bear’s son. Then she asks a bishop (*archierey*) and the *tsar* for permission to christen the baby. In the end, the decision is taken to make the boy an exhibit in a museum and issue a pardon for the woman (“What was the poor woman guilty of? She probably did not enjoy her life at all.”)

22 Morozko ([Grand-]Father Frost) – this is the name of the character who, in CIP 480, tests the main girl character. A father, at the request of the stepmother, leaves his own daughter (who is of marriageable age) in the winter forest for the night. There, Grandfather Frost (Morozko) asks her if she is cold. The fairy tale does not describe Morozko’s appearance, we only know that he knows how to control the cold. The girl politely answers him three times that everything is fine, although she is freezing. He leaves her alive and rewards her with a rich dowry. The second girl (the stepmother’s daughter), in a similar situation, rudely responds to Morozko, for which he freezes her to death. In a fairy tale with this plot from the Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, the storyteller, in the finale, reports that “grandfather” was the Master of the Forest: “What kind of grandfather was that?” > “The grandfather of the forest.”; cf. Folklore Archive of St. Petersburg State University, Bel 16-1. Recorded from Anna Marovna Antonova, born in 1906, in the village of Mitino, Belozersky District, Vologda Region, July 6, 1997, by E. A. Migunova, M. M. Pirogovskaya and A. Yu. Ponomareva.

23 *Leshiy* (*lesnoj*, *leshak*) – a forest spirit or a master of a forest. According to the Russian traditional worldview, each locus has its own metaphysical master. In stories about encounters with a wild beast in the forest, the narrators often refer to the bear as “master of the forest”.

24 *Zhmurki* is similar to Blind Tom or the blind man’s buff game – a game leader with his/her eyes blinded by a bandage tries to catch other players in a closed area.

with payment of a pension to her from the treasury and awarding her a medal (FOLKLORE TREASURES 1998, 285–290). The tales based on plots 480 and 311, folklore pictures, erotic tales and stories about events allegedly happening in real life allow the initiation of a woman by a bear, their sexual relations and common household and all the above-mentioned in various combinations. At the same time, there are no plots in the whole body of Russian folklore about any close relations between a man and a female bear. It means that the bear in Russian fairy tales is an embodiment of masculinity upgraded to the level of the mythical master of the forest and the ritual specialist.

The fourth remaining plot of the Russian fairy tale with a bear character marked as CIP 650A – “Ivan the Bear’s Ear” – is a narrative with a male protagonist born by a woman from a bear. He possesses extraordinary strength and accomplishes unbelievable feats. This plot refers to stories about innocent, persecuted heroes.

Taking four tale genres as examples, we have tracked the realisation of the bear image in the system of Russian folk tale characters. In tall tales, we see as the “impossible formula” that a bear flies through the skies. In Russian folklore, birds usually fly between this world and the other in time and space. Birds are stable metaphors for femininity, so, the tall tale states that, even in a fairy tale, the correlation of the image of a bear with the categories of bird/feminine is impossible. The bear is a masculine image. The cumulative tales strengthen the bear’s reputation as a mighty force. The trickster tales usually end with the bear losing the competition with the trickster (a man, a woman, a fox, and so on), thus allowing storytellers and their audience to dream about a victory over a mighty force and the established world order. Becoming skilled in tricks provides a chance of overcoming prevailing forces by cunning. The plots of fairy tales with the bears as donors and antagonists against a mythological background describe a provisional/ritual marriage of the woman and the bear. Such a marriage legitimises the supernatural powers of women. These powers are the appraisal of her skills (spinning, weaving, singing) and they demonstrate her erotic (fertile) capacities as well as the knowledge of the border between life and death. So, the bears in Russian folk tales play various and multiple roles: the embodiment of almost existential horror, the simpleton, the metaphysical master, and the ritual specialist. However, in none of his roles so far is the bear domesticated: he is a physical and metaphysical power that can be conquered by artfulness and deception, but in any other respect is quite unmanageable.

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