

Skaz

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1 Definition

Skaz (from Russian *skazat'* "to say, to tell") is a special type of narration cultivated particularly in Russian literature since 1830 (although, with certain differences, it can also be found in other Slavic as well in Western European and American literatures) whose roots date back to oral folklore traditions. It is characterized by a personal narrator, a simple man of the people with restricted intellectual horizons and linguistic competence, addressing listeners from his own social milieu in a markedly oral speech.

2 Explication

Although *skaz* has enjoyed particular interest ever since the work of the Russian formalists, who thought of it as a form of defamiliarization, there is still no consensus today on what is meant by the term and what characteristics should be ascribed to it.

According to tradition, two basic types of *skaz* can be distinguished: (1) *characterizing skaz*, which is motivated by the narrator's linguistic-ideological point of view; (2) *ornamental skaz*, which does not indicate a particular personal narrator but must be referred to an entire spectrum of heterogeneous voices and masks and often shows traces of authorial (not narratorial!) ornamentalization (Schmid → Poetic or Ornamental Prose [1]). However, the ornamental type can be reasonably assigned to *skaz* only if the discourse spread out among heterogeneous voices and visions retains marks of a personal narrator who is clearly dissociated from the author. The internationalized concept of *skaz* refers mainly to the first, perspectivized type.

3 Aspects of the Phenomenon and History of its Study

3.1 Features of Characterizing *Skaz*

Characterizing *skaz* can be referred to when the following features are present:

1. Narratoriality

Skaz should be understood as an exclusively narratorial phenomenon. It appears in the text of the narrating entity (regardless of whether this is a primary, secondary or tertiary instance), and not in a character's text. This basic definition excludes from the domain of *skaz* all semantic-stylistic phenomena that have their origins in the text of a narrated character and are based on an "infection" of the narrator with the style of his protagonist (or of the narrated milieu) or on a conscious reproduction of individual features of the characters' discourse. The interpretation of *skaz* as a manifestation of free indirect discourse and similar techniques as suggested, for instance, by Titunik (1963, 1977) and McLean (1985), must be rejected.

2. Restrictedness of intellectual horizons

An obligatory feature of characterizing *skaz* is the intellectual distance between the author and the narrator, a non-professional teller, a man of the people, whose narration stands out due to a certain naiveté and clumsiness. This inexperienced narrator does not control all shades of his discourse. The result is a tension, characteristic of *skaz*, between what the narrator would like to say and what he actually reveals unintentionally (Šklovskij [1928] 1970: 17).

3. Double-voicedness

The distance between narrator and author determines a narratorial-authorial double-voicedness of the narrator's text. In it, the naive narrator and the author, who presents the former's discourse with particular semantic—not rarely ironic or humorous—accentuation, express themselves simultaneously. The double-voicedness also means there is a bi-functionality in the narrator's discourse: it functions as both the representing medium and as represented discourse.

4. Orality

Oral presentation of the narrator's text has been regarded as a fundamental feature of *skaz* since the beginning. Naturally, oral discourse does not preclude the imitation of written discourse. Many *skaz* narrators, such as Mixail Zoščenko, like to use forms of expression belonging to official written discourse. However, this practice bears traces of non-authentic, sometimes awkward reproduction.

5. Spontaneity

Skaz should be understood as a spontaneous oral discourse, and not as something consciously thought-out. Spontaneity means the representation of the discourse as a developing process that is not necessarily linear, consistent or goal-oriented.

6. Colloquialism

The spontaneous oral discourse of a narrator who is a man of the people bears, as a rule, the characteristics of colloquial language and often takes on features of vulgar, non-grammatical or slightly aphasic speech. On the other hand, colloquialism in no way rules out the occasional use of written style. Zoščenko's "little man" likes to employ the Soviet idiom he has learned from newspapers and propaganda. The use of literary or official language in his mouth is "defamiliarizing," however, and receives ironic authorial accentuation.

7. Dialogicity

The orientation of the speaker toward his listener and his reactions is characteristic of *skaz*. So long as the narrator assumes a well-disposed listener from the same milieu, dialogicity does not, as a rule, create any particular tension. In any case, the speaker will give explanations, anticipate questions and answer them. However, as soon as the *skaz*-speaker ascribes a critical stance to his public, tension will build between him and the addressee.

The features listed above do not all have the same relevance. Orality, spontaneity, colloquialism and dialogicity are developed to varying degrees in works traditionally classified as *skaz*. A weaker development of one does not mean the work is necessarily not *skaz*. However, the first three features should be seen as obligatory: narratoriality, restricted intellectual horizons and double-voicedness. Without them, the term (characterizing) *skaz* loses its meaning.

In Russian literature the main representatives of *skaz* are N. Gogol', N. Leskov, A. Remizov, M. Zoščenko, I. Babel', A. Platonov, V. Šukšin, V. Belov. Phenomena comparable to characterizing *skaz* can also be found in Western literatures. The lyric sub-genre of the dramatic monologue in 19th-century Britain features an unreliable speaker (Shen → Unreliability [2]) with a restricted view in a communication situation, although he neither speaks dialect nor does he come from an inferior social class (cf. Rohwer-Happe 2011). Examples are Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess." In American literature, examples of a *skaz*-like narration are Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Ring Lardner's "Haircut" and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (cf. Prince 1987; Banfield 2005). In contemporary German literature, Christian Kracht's novel *Faserland* is a clear example of *skaz* stylisation. Although the teller is no simple man of the people, his shallow drivel about parties and bars, brand names and celebrities makes him an equivalent of the Russian simple-minded "democratic hero" (cf. Schmid [2005] 2008: 177-78).

3.1 Ornamental *Skaz*

Ornamental *skaz* is a hybrid phenomenon based on a paradoxical mixture of the mutually excluding principles of characterization and poetization (Koževnikova 1971, 1976, 1994: 64–74). In contrast to characterizing *skaz*, ornamental *skaz* does not indicate a personal narrator endowed with non-professional characteristics, but rather calls into being an impersonal narrating entity which appears in various roles and masks. Of the features of characterizing *skaz*, the basic oral tone, traces of colloquialism and the narrative gestures of a personal narrator can remain in ornamental *skaz*; however, these traits no longer indicate the unified figure of a teller, but are oriented toward a broad spectrum of heterogeneous voices. Ornamental *skaz* is thus multi-faceted and poly-stylistic, fluctuating between orality and literacy, colloquialism and poetry, folklore and literature.

Ornamental *skaz* combines narrativity with poeticity. To the extent, however, that poeticity, along with the non-temporal links (Schmid → Non-temporal Linking in Narration [3]) that constitute it, supplants the story's temporal links, ornamental prose moves from the domain of "narrative art" into that of "verbal art" (on this dichotomy, cf. Hansen-Löve 1978; Schmid 2008). The impersonal narrator then appears only as the intersection of heterogeneous verbal gestures, as the point at which different stylistic lines converge. In ornamental *skaz*, not only is the expressive function (sensu Bühler [1934] 1990: 35) of the text in reference to the narrator decreased, but the role of perspective is generally weakened. Characters' discourses tend to remain stylistically subordinated to homogenizing poetization and to display no linguistic individuality. Whereas characterizing *skaz* is conclusively motivated by the ideological and linguistic physiognomy of the concrete speaker, ornamental *skaz* distinguishes itself by reduced, diffuse perspective and weak characterological motivation. To speak of a variety of *skaz* in the case of ornamental texts, however, makes sense only when the text comprises at least some traces of the above-mentioned obligatory features of characterizing *skaz*.

3.2 History of the Concept and its Study

The forms and functions of *skaz* were a central topic in Russian formalist narrative theory (Hansen-Löve 1978: 274–303). The discussion was opened with Ėjxenbaum's "The Illusion of *Skaz*," one of the key essays of early formalism. Here, *skaz* is regarded above all as the emancipation of verbal art from "literariness, which is not always valuable for the verbal artist," as a means of introducing into literature the word as "a living, dynamic act which is formed by voice, articulation, and intonation and is also accompanied by gestures and mimicry" (Ėjxenbaum [1918] 1978: 233). In the subsequent famous essay "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' is Made," Ėjxenbaum underlines the shift of the center of gravity from the plot to devices which make

language as such “perceptible.” In this essay, Ėjxenbaum distinguishes two types of *skaz*: (1) “narrating *skaz*” and (2) “reproducing *skaz*” ([1919] 1974: 269). The first type refers to *skaz* motivated by the narrator, his language and ideology. The second type consists of “devices of verbal mimicry and verbal gesture, in the form of specially devised comic articulations, word-plays based on sounds, capricious arrangements of syntax and so on” (ibid.). Analyzing the “Overcoat,” with its montage-structure and ornamental stylization, Ėjxenbaum is interested only in the second type. By contrast, in the later work on Leskov ([1925] 1975: 214), he defines *skaz* as a “form of narrative prose which, in vocabulary, syntax, and choice of speech rhythms, displays an orientation toward the narrator’s oral speech.” Here, he explicitly excludes from *skaz* all narrative forms “which have a declamatory character or the character of ‘poetic prose’ and which at the same time are not oriented toward telling, but toward oratorical speech or lyrical monologue.” With this definition, he restricts *skaz* to the first, characterizing, perspectivized type. Nevertheless, he does concede the existence of such paradoxical forms as “ornamental *skaz*,” which preserves “traces of a folkloric foundation and of *skaz* intonation,” but where there is actually “no narrator as such” ([1925] 1975: 221). In the end, however, *skaz* does not interest Ėjxenbaum as a specific narrative phenomenon, but as a “demonstration” of the more general principle of verbal art: “*Skaz* in itself is not important; what is important is the *orientation toward the word, toward intonation, toward voice*, be it even in written transformation. [...] We are starting in large measure from the beginning, as it were [...] Our relationship toward the word has become more concrete, more sensitive, more physiological” ([1925] 1975: 223; italics in the original).

Tynjanov also distinguishes two variants of *skaz* in the literature of his time: (1) the older, humorous *skaz*, which goes back to Leskov and was cultivated by Zoščenko; (2) the “Remizov-*skaz*,” a “lyrical, almost poetical” variant. In the same way as Ėjxenbaum, Tynjanov sees the function of *skaz*, in one variant as in the other, as making the word perceptible, “palpable,” but he places his emphasis somewhat differently insofar as he stresses the role of the reader: “The entire narrative becomes a monologue and the reader enters into the narration, starts to intone, to gesticulate, to smile. He does not read *skaz*, he plays it. *Skaz* introduces into prose not the hero, but the reader” (Tynjanov [1924] 1977: 160–61).

Vinogradov calls it inadequate to define the technique with orientation toward oral or colloquial speech, since *skaz* was also possible without any kind of orientation on these types of language: “*Skaz* is a self-willed literary, artistic orientation toward an oral monologue of the narrative type; it is an artistic imitation of monological speech which contains a narrative plot and is constructed, as it were, as if it were being directly spoken” (Vinogradov [1925] 1978: 244).

Similarly to Ėjxenbaum and Tynjanov, Vinogradov distinguishes two types of *skaz*: (1) *skaz* that is bound to a character; (2) “authorial *skaz*,” “preceding from the author’s ‘I.’” Whereas in the first type, “the illusion of an everyday situation is created, [...] the amplitude of lexical oscillations grows narrow [and] the stylistic motion leads a secluded life within the narrow confines of a linguistic consciousness that is dominated by the conditions of the social mode of life that is to be presented,” in the second type, authorial *skaz*, the author is “free”: “In the literary masquerade the writer can freely change stylistic masks within a single artistic work” (Vinogradov [1925] 1978: 248–49).

Ėjxenbaum’s conception of *skaz* as an orientation toward oral speech is contradicted by Baxtin, who sets new emphasis on the phenomenon by focusing only on the “narrating” type (in Ėjxenbaum’s terminology): “[Ėjxenbaum] completely fails to take into account the fact that in the majority of cases *skaz* is above all an orientation toward *someone else’s speech*, and only then, as a consequence, toward oral speech. [...] It seems to us that in most cases *skaz* is introduced precisely for the sake of *someone else’s voice*, a voice socially distinct, carrying with it precisely those points of view and evaluations necessary to the author” (Baxtin [1929] 1984: 191–92; italics in the original).

For Baxtin, someone else’s speech is, above all, the bearer of a different “evaluative position” (*smyslovaja pozicija*). If, however, the orientation toward someone else’s speech is elevated to a basic feature of *skaz*, phenomena will be ascribed to it that could not be reconciled with it according to a traditional understanding. To these phenomena belongs, for example, the intellectual, oratorical speech that appeals directly to the listener’s evaluative position, as is the case in Dostoevskij’s *Notes from the Underground*. Koževnikova (1971: 100) is right to state that, in Baxtin’s conception, “*skaz* disappears as an independent narrative form.”

3.3 Relevance to Narratology

Skaz is not simply a stylistic or rhetorical issue. In its sharp linguistic and ideological dissociation of implied author, narrator, fictive addressee, and implied reader, it lays bare the fundamental communicative structures of narrative. The relationship between the *skaz*-teller and his fictive listener(s) mirrors communication in an exemplary way. Particularly relevant to narratology is the shift in the center of gravity from the story to the discourse, a move which, as a rule, says more about the teller than he intended, thus bringing the telling process, with all its conscious and unconscious motives, into sharp focus.

One important issue is the functions of *skaz* in its different varieties. Formalists

concentrated on the aesthetic function: defamiliarization, increase of the text's perceptibility, deviation from literary tradition by introduction of non-traditional, low narrators and language material, activation of the reader. Baxtin emphasized the conflict of values accompanying multivoicedness and heteroglossia (Tjupa → Heteroglossia [4]). Zoščenko, one of the main representatives of *skaz* in Russian literature of the 1920s, used the technique as a means to criticize either the official political ideology that could not be understood by the simple man or the philistine thinking that was not able to fathom the revolutionary changes in the Soviet Union (cf. Günther 1979). Narratologists should be interested in the aspects of embedded narration, in the demonstration of the process of telling with its clearly pronounced functions of representation, expression, and appeal. Of particular interest for narratology are cases of an active feedback of the imagined addressee on the *skaz*-teller and his narration.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

An issue not yet sufficiently explored is empirical research on readers' interest and reactions with regard to *skaz*. Does characterizing *skaz* imitating the simple man's intellectual and linguistic behavior really reach uneducated readers, or is it rather typical reading material of the well-educated strata? A related question would be to analyze to what degree the implied reader as an ideal recipient (Schmid → Implied Reader [5]) is to identify with the narrator's fictive addressee, and whether the relationship between implied reader and fictive addressee echoes the relationship between author and narrator.

Also underexplored is the question of the genesis of *skaz*, its development and its social functions in varying cultural and political situations.

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