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Rumours as a Subject of Scientific Analysis: Social Psychology, History, Philology

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The paper highlights the problems of the theory of rumours in various Humanities: psychology, history, linguistics, study of literature, etc. Particular attention is given to the problem of the "rumours" definition, as well as to the issues of "Rumours in situations of social conflicts", "The image of rumours in Russian linguistic world-image", "Reliability and confidence in rumours", "Communicative nature of rumours".

Keywords: gossip, rumour, information channels, mass communication, rumours in the linguistic world-image.

Introduction

Rumours are a specific phenomenon of information nature. It is archaic and has an ancient history (Dmitryev, 1995. P. 5; Dubin and Tolstykh, 1995. P. 18; Shcherbatykh, 2007. P. 204), but at the same time it is very up-to-date, involved in organization of modern communicative environment with its form and content. In the English language tradition rumours and related phenomena are described by several synonymous lexemes - *rumour, gossip, whisper, "grapevine", buzz*.

The sociological survey data show wide prevalence of this phenomenon: responding to the question "Do you often have to deal with rumours?" 65 % of Leningrad residents at that time chose the answer "sometimes", and among respondents with higher education the figure was

71 % (Losenkov, 1983. P. 80; Pocheptsov, 2001. P. 489). Approximately the same total rate (within 60–70 %) was given by the surveys conducted by Russian sociologists in 1992–1995 (Khlopyev, 1995. P. 22; Dmitryev etc, 1997. P. 134).

Although in the Soviet science the problem of rumours was discussed by professional psychologists and sociologists from time to time, it did not exist for an official broad public opinion.

Perestroika has drastically changed the situation: the Russian press marked the rumours out as an object that was worth attention and collective discussion. Since the late 80s some articles appeared in the national press, in which the authors tried to promote and theoretically develop this issue, see, for example (Volkov, 1988; Vechorkin, 1989; Rumours ..., 1990). At the same

time mass media “let” unverified information appear in the type area.

As a result, modern experts have relatively good reasons to qualify gossip, whisper, rumours, tales, false rumours as a stable form of mass behaviour. Mass media qualifies it as conductors of an unauthorized “content” (Olshansky, 2001. P. 274). Evidence of the latter is the countless statements like following:

Everybody was excited about the rumours of Ms. Varum's pregnancy (Segodnyashnyaya gazeta, October 24, 1998); *Berezovsky, whose pernicious influence had been rumoured for so long, confirmed his reputation once again. According to the media reports at present Boris Abramovich has returned himself the lion's share of his lost influence* (Vecherny Krasnoyarsk, May 21, 1999); *Rumours are simply swirling around him* [Alexey Kudrin]. *It is said that owing to the patronage of the vice-premier modest St. Petersburg Bank for Reconstruction and Development will soon become a new centre of banking life in St. Petersburg* (Kommersant-Den'gi, December 27, 2000); *There were rumours at the beginning of the summer that relations between Gryzlov and Shoigu had failed* (Ogonyok, No. 35, 2003); *It is said that during the Civil War the admiral Kolchak retreating to the east of Russia buried the part of the Tsar's gold near Shcheglovsk (Kemerovo nowadays)* (Tom', March 29, 2006); *Just the part of the gang was caught. <...> And how many of them are still at large? Some people say that twenty, others say - thirty, and others say - fifty. And now they say that Tsapok is sapheaded and has a reference from the booby hatch* (Komsomolskaya Pravda, November 24, 2010).

Rumours possess such a powerful status that they affect the structure of the titles and make entire columns and special articles in the genres of “brief information”, “kaleidoscopic tongue twisters” (Kapanadze, 2005. P. 300, 303):

“What the country talks about...” and “By the grapevine and authoritatively” in the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda”, “Rating of rumours” and “Laboratory of rumours” in the newspaper “Moskovsky Komsomolets”, “News, rumours, gossip, talks” in “Moskovsky Komsomolets v Krasnoyarske”, “Whisper” in “Argumenty i fady”, “It is said ...” in “Kommersant-Dengi” and “Map of rumours” in “Ogonyok”, “By the grapevine and in essence” in the newspaper “Sovetsky Sport”, “Rumour of the issue” in “Krestyansky Front”, “What they talk about” in “Gorodskiye Novosti” (Krasnoyarsk), “Rumour” and “Gossip” in “Komok” (Krasnoyarsk), etc.

Such columns have become daily reality of contemporary Russian mass media, which has its own historical roots. In 1842–1846 P.A. Mashkov's magazine “Gossip”, which had six issues, went out in Saint Petersburg and in 1855 young N.A. Dobrolyubov released a handwritten anti-government collected book “Rumours” (Isupov, electronic resource). Under the Soviet rule it was impossible to start publishing of such editions, and similar genre units in periodicals seemed to be an obvious exception to the rule: among them there was a section “News and rumours” in the magazine “Bulletin of agriculture” published in 1918 (Kabanov, 1997. P. 365), and the column “By the grapevine and authoritatively” in Norilsk newspaper “Zapolyarnaya pravda” published in the 1970s.

The period when the studied “element” of oral communication was underestimated by serious researchers has become history. On the contrary, it is qualified as an important way of social self-informing and considered the crossing point of many scientific fields (Khlopyev, 1995. P. 21).

History glimpses of the research on rumours

The systematic study of the rumours phenomenon abroad began after the First World

War. The direction was initiated by German and American psychologists, who by 1940 had developed a typology of rumours and defined it as unofficial city news and thoroughly analyzed its subjective nature, establishing the fact of “alteration” of information in accordance with individual aims (Park, 1940; Knapp, 1944; Allport and Postman, 1945. P. 61-81). In Nazi Germany research work in this field was placed on the secret list and the results were effectively used at the fronts of the World War II.

The 60s was the time when this issue was introduced to the U.S.A. security agencies. Dynamic mechanisms of informal information were professionally investigated by the CIA and the Pentagon with the belief that propaganda by means of rumours, especially in foreign policy activity, is comparable to propaganda in the mass media (Nazaretyan, 2003. P. 91).

Since then rumours have been studied in sociology and social psychology (Knapp, 1944; Festinger et al., 1948; Shibutani, 1961; Allport and Postman, 1945; Robber and Tilman, 1988; Andriyanov et al., 1993; Dubin and Tolstykh, 1993a, 1993b; Latynov, 1995; Khlopyev, 1995, 1996, Dmitryev, 1995; Dubin, 2001; Olshansky, 2001; Mamontov, 2002; Popkova, 1999, 2002; Bezzubtsev, 2005), philosophy (Pokida, 1990; Dubin and Tolstykh, 1993b; Isupov, electronic resource), semiotics (Pocheptsov, 1990), the theory and practice of communication (Pocheptsov, 1995, 1998; Panasyuk, 1998; Zelinsky, 2008), in the field of political technologies (Black, 1990, 1997; Pikov, 1995; Malyshkov, 1998; Fayer, 1998; Séguéla, 1999; Shchedrovitskaya, 2002; Sheinov, 2007; Shcherbatykh, 2007; Shchennikova and Butina, 2008; Matveychev, 2009), advertising and management (Pozhidaeva, 1996; Makarov, 1998; Ilyinsky, 1999; Pocheptsov, 1999; Michelson and Mouly, 2000; Nikitina, 2006).

In every area listed above this subject has been developed in a deep and fruitful way, but

however, yielding the leading position to two traditions – social psychology and history.

Rumours in social psychology

Although Russian psychologists have been studying this issue since the 1920s qualifying rumours from the clear class position as “an oral newspaper of counterrevolution” (Shafir, 1924), the interest to this issue remained undeveloped and was partially revived only in the 70–80s, preserving the strong shade of ideology (Sherkovin, 1973, 1975; Sherkovin and Nazaretyan, 1984).

In social psychology the pace for discussing this issue was set not by Russian, but by foreign, mostly American scientists. Today within the framework of different schools they develop a new theory of rumours basing on well-known papers written by T. Shibutani, L. Festinger, R. Knapp, G. Allport and L. Postman.

It should be noted that though nearly a century has passed since the publication of the first works, the analytical attention to verbal communication flows is not running out, and is even constantly expanding, especially if you take into account research works written by sociologists and psychologists of our country, which have been intensively published during the past two decades. The scope and depth of the knowledge level in this field is indicated by rather extensive reference materials collected by the author of this article, among them 433 articles and publications on the theme of “Rumours” and related themes “Whisper”, “Gossip” and “Urban legends”. Researchers are interested in specific differences of the listed objects (Rosnow, 2001; Bordia and DiFonzo, 2004; DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007), the regularity of the formation of rumours content (Kapferer, 1989), social functions of verbal communication, mechanisms of its spreading (Pendleton, 1998; Miller, 2006; Donovan, 2007) and the discussion of strict

scientific definitions that is ensuing from such complex interactions.

Not being able to report here in detail about the achievements of social psychology in the given field, I would like to outline the works of our country's psychologist – D.S. Gorbatov (Gorbatov, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). He not only implements a lot of ideas and achievements of overseas colleagues in the Russian science, offering their detailed and even terminologically subtle criticism, but also comprehends the visible prospects of such research. In particular, he rejects the established opinion about the constitutive falsity and irrationality of rumours and finds it useful to analyze the microgroup context of its existence - short-term and small communicative associations, cliques and dyads (Gorbatov, 2010).

Generally speaking, the attention of Russian social psychologists to the problem of rumours is obvious, though the theoretical basis of this problem is based on international sources.

Rumours in historiography and the study of folklore

Real and enduring tradition of rumours understanding which has a 150-year history and is cultivated on the national ground exists just in Russian historiography and study of folklore.

According to V.V. Kabanov in the second half of the 19th century N.A. Dobrolyubov and G. V. Plekhanov were the first who considered rumours and gossip as an expression of public opinion urging to study and take it into account in political and practical activities. A few decades later the first professional historians – A.Z. Popelnitsky and I.I. Ignatovich - referred to rumours describing the mood of the Russian peasants in the period of the abolition of serfdom (Kabanov, 1997. Pp. 362–363). In the 1920s a well-known Soviet scientist S.N. Chernov raised the question about “archival rumours” being a good material for the study of popular political journalism of

the Decembrist period (Chernov, 1926, 1934, see also: Kudryashov, 1926; Syroechkovsky, 1934; Poberezhnikov, 1995. P. 3).

Later rumours have been studied as a stereotyped text form which expresses socio-utopian legends, popular conceptions, feelings and dreams, as “the most efficient form” of the same popular political journalism during the abolition of serfdom (1859-1861), the era of “redistribution” of the land (1870-1880s) and others (Domanovsky, 1954; Bazanov, 1962. Pp. 200-216; 1974: 142-175; Chistov, 1967. Pp. 3, 336, 339; Vinogradov, 1972; Litvak, 1980; Fedorov, 1982).

The interest of the authors who had been working on this issue during the past decade and gathering representative scientific forums for discussing it (Nikonova, 2010), was considerably wider. Its time framework, except for the historical period mentioned above, includes the 18th and 20th centuries (from the history of the Pugachev's rebellion, the First World War and the February Revolution in 1917 to the collectivization of Soviet peasants in the countryside and the Great Patriotic War), and its spatial boundaries cover not only the European part of Russia, but also Eastern territories (three centuries ago rumours were actively circulating in the lands of the Urals and Siberia).

Thorough archival research, documentary witnesses, processing of hundreds of “inquiries” and investigation records of “disclosure” bring scientists closer to two main conclusions. The first one is the huge impact of rumours on the ordinary life of the traditional society, when rumours were “almost the leading type of communication” and “the most important source of information” for illiterate peasants about foreign and national state policy, the change of monarchs, conspiracies, revolutions - about modern life of the country and the world. The second conclusion consolidates the role of rumours in extreme situations of socio-political and ethnic conflicts in which rumours

initially playing the role of motive-incentive of people's disobedience to the power, then united the rioters forming the lines of their social behaviour, and after the inevitable defeat performed a compensatory function giving hope to the victims of political repressions (Poberezhnikov, 1995. Pp. 4, 47–49; see also: Rakhmatullin, 1990; Gromyko, 1991. P. 209; Mironova, 1991a, 1991b; Buganov, 1992. Pp. 58, 63; Yarov, 1997 ; Kolonitsky, 1999, 2006; Krinko, 2009).

Today the papers listed above perfectly fit in one of the most promising directions of the world historical science – oral history.

Oral history has been actively developing since the second half of the 1940s defining rumours and memories of eyewitnesses and parties in events along with the archaic tradition as the main source. Taken together they allow to record unique information that is not passed in a traditional way – the traces of social memory about the significant event that are kept in the oral form and attitude of the ordinary person to it. Thus, the actual human dimension is given back to the ancient human science and researchers gain a unique opportunity to reconstruct an informal, popular version of the national history¹.

Rumours in philology

In the late 1970s in general philology rumours as a scientific object were indirectly defined by Yu.V. Rozhdestvensky, who spoke about them in the wide context of whispering (Rozhdestvensky, 1978, 1979). Two decades later V.V. Prozorov returned to this issue considering it as the promising one for complex philological disciplines: sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, study of folklore and study of literature (Prozorov, 1998). Since that time rumours have been studied in two directions – as a phenomenon of communicative nature and as a marked part of the Russian language world-image. Some authors are motivated by this double interest (Kreydlin

and Samokhin, 2003; Osetrova, 2003; Dolgaya, 2000, 2002).

Science of rumours as an integrated, communicative and textual phenomenon is divided into several research areas. First, it is the problem of defining the rumours, which are at the same time interpreted as a speech act (Kreydlin and Samokhin, 2003), as a speech genre (including folklore genre of urban verbal prose) (Veselov, 2000; Utekhin, electronic resource; Maksimov, 2001 ; Clarke, 2002; Langlois, 2005; Bessonov, 2009), as a communicative channel (Osetrova, 2004, 2006a), as a form of mass communication (Dolgaya, 2002), as a part of a magic deceptive ritual in traditional folk Slavic culture (Tolstaya, 1995. P. 112), and as an “unreliable message” – an ancient tool of the psychological war (Rozhdestvensky, 2004. P. 372) (in the last two cases the reference to the rumours functional is noticeable). Another stumbling block is the authorship of the relevant texts: on the one hand, they are spreading as anonymous, but on the other hand they are fed from one informational source, that is, of course, hypothetical and irrelevant for most translators, but sought in the case of intentional spreading of information by a verbal communication channel. It leads to the discussion of reliability/unreliability of information and trust/distrust of the mass user in it – and then to the analysis of the extremely large “field” of rumours, that is cultivated not only in the field of the spoken language, but also in the media and the Internet. About the latest issue linguists write quite often with a notable element of estimation (Kostomarov, 2005. P. 190; Kormilitsyna, 2006. Pp. 279-281; Osetrova, 2005, 2006b, 2006v; Panchenko, 2010a, 2010b).

In the field of linguistic semantics we are facing the necessity to identify semantic and lexical dominants for a great number of concepts that are synonymous to rumours and are in use in the Russian language – for all these whispering,

news, gossip, slander, false tales, talks, etc. It cannot be said that unanimity prevails here: the authors of the project “Russian ideographic dictionary” give preference to the talks, defining its status as a leading concept of the World VI created by the human mind and spirit and the highest in the hierarchy they have built (Russian ideographic..., 2004), but G.E. Kreydlin and M.V. Samokhin insist on the priority status of rumours (Kreydlin and Samokhin, 2003).

Sound arguments founded by both parties may be developed much deeper by further observations of the linguistic existence of dedicated images, concepts, and ideas. However, philology has already acquired a certain scope of knowledge based on semantic analysis of literary texts, media publications, Russian proverbs and sayings. It indicates a complex metaphor image of rumours associated in the people’s mind with the water element, snowball, rockfall and with a living creature that behaves actively and sometimes aggressively against the person itself (Dolgaya, 2000; Kreydlin and Samokhin, 2003; Osetrova, 2009; Saifullina, 2008).

In the list of philological works about rumours the research papers written by experts in literature are standing apart.

Rumours are the text-forming element of literary works written by Beaumarchais and Cervantes, Griboyedov and Pushkin, Bulgakov and Zoshchenko, Dombrovsky and Suworov: the list is extended with the memoir literature and includes more than a dozen of classic and contemporary authors. But perhaps in recent years the greatest scientific attention has been focused on the works written by N.V. Gogol.

From the middle of the first decade of the 21st century there has been an intense interest in the theme “The rumours/gossip” in Gogol works” that has led to several serious research, including theses (Vysotskaya, 2008; Nikolaeva, 2008; Solivetti, electronic resource). With the

reference to the early ideas of M.M. Bakhtin (V.N. Voloshinov) and A.D. Sinyavsky (A. Tertz) (Voloshinov, 1995. P. 177; Tertz, 1981. P. 420), literature experts study rumours and gossip in the aspect of “the speech effectiveness”, which changes the heroes’ destinies in Gogol works, and also as a plot spring mechanism, which works in the information space of “Dead Souls” that is parallel to the chronotopos of the main action of the poem.

It is extremely significant that C. Solivetti, the author of the massive opus “Gossip as a heraldic construction (Mise en Abyme) in “Dead Souls”, carefully carries out a literary analysis and already at the very beginning of the paper deviates from it invading the area of communicative science and indicating how accurately the writer has recreated the structure and the purpose of the oral information channel anticipating modern sociolinguistic research (Solivetti, electronic resource).

In fact, we have a locked circle of problems. Rumours have been revealed as an object of observation over a hundred years ago first by history, and then by social psychology, and have finally become the scope of application of philological efforts. Now rumours inevitably make almost every researcher, regardless of his professional belonging, turn his eyes on its social and communicative nature.

Conclusion

There is no established definition for rumours in scientific literature: some researchers see them as a mode of existence of the modern society and a fragment of the mass current information (V.I. Andriyanov, V.K. Levashov, A.T. Khlopyev), others – as a specific type of interpersonal communication and psychological influence (V.P. Sheinov), the third group of researchers – as a *sub-discourse of a small philistine sensation* (I.V. Silantyev), the forth group – as a circulating

form of communication (T. Shibutani), the fifth group defines rumours as a communication channel (A.Y. Panasyuk, N. Pikov), and, finally, as a unit of mass communication, message type and a “piece” of text deliberately lost by the official culture (G. Pocheptsov) (also see the list given two pages earlier).

We do not deny completely any of these points of view because each of them helps to reveal the multidimensionality of the subject of our research. Nevertheless, we must define the position we have chosen for ourselves. In our opinion the nature of rumours is the nature of the text. Since texts of this kind belong to relatively stable, thematic, stylistic and compositional types (Bakhtin, 1986. P. 250), we define rumours as an independent speech genre which is the key one in design and transfer of **unauthorized information** (Osetrova, 2007a, 2007b). In other

words, the goal of this genre is distributing of mass, initially oral current news, the authorship and veracity of which are uncertain and for which no one is liable.

Different scientific schools and approaches, as one can see from the review, discuss this phenomenon in different ways, in most cases from their own narrowly specialized positions. Therefore, it might be useful to consider the dynamic component of rumours and represent it in all completeness, which can be achieved considering general scientific knowledge and the results of social practices. The leading approaches of such analysis could potentially be:

- attributes of rumours,
- the scope of their existence, occurrence and utilization, and
- their practical use.

¹ About the genesis and prospects of oral history development, national experience of its understanding, as well as about rumours as the source of oral history study, see (Kabanov, 1997; Orlov, 2006).

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Слухи как предмет научного анализа: социальная психология, история, филология

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Статья освещает проблематику теории слухов в различных гуманитарных науках: психологии, истории, лингвистике, литературоведении и др. Особое внимание уделено проблеме определения слухов, а также темам «Слухи в ситуациях социального конфликта», «Образ слухов в русской языковой картине мира», «Достоверность слухов и доверие к ним», «Коммуникативная природа слухов».

Ключевые слова: слухи, молва, каналы информации, массовая коммуникация, слухи в языковой картине мира.
