

## “Sound Shaping” of East Slavic *Zagovory*

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Every work of art, including verbal art, presents to us a world in itself with its own standards of behavior, its own space and time, its own system of values. Each work of verbal art has within its structure a number of culturally conventionalized devices that are used to mark the transition from the real world to the world represented. Among these marking devices are traditional techniques based upon an employment of special acoustic features such as tempo, timber, loudness, pitch contour, and temporal length of sounds. The existence of these traditional techniques becomes most essential and significant when we deal with works of verbal art from oral tradition, but they have not as yet received sufficient consideration in the current scholarship.

In this paper, the traditional devices that serve to create the “sound-shaping” of a certain speech genre are examined. In particular, we are concerned with the performance of East Slavic *zagovory*, oral charms that are spoken by the practitioners of folk curing when healing a patient, bewitching water, or undertaking other tasks associated with folk medical practice.

The material analyzed consists of tape recordings made during fieldwork carried out by the author, as well as other recordings either borrowed from Dr. V. Kharitonova or placed on deposit in the Speech Laboratory of the philological faculty of Moscow State University. All these acoustic recordings were encoded between 1964 and 1991 in different regions of Russia (the Arkhangelsk, Kaluga, Kostroma, and Smolensk regions, and in the Khabarovsk territory) and in the Gomel region of Byelorussia. In selecting material for analysis, I have responded to a need for certain restrictions. First, not every text of *zagovor* uttered by a conjurer and fixed on tape by the researcher corresponds to the real (or natural) situation in which charms are used. Thus we excluded from consideration texts or fragments of texts pronounced for dictation as well as

texts intended for a person who was not a patient. Because of the practical analytical difficulties entailed, I also did not consider the texts whispered or spoken *sotto voce*.

Part of the function of a word in the process of a healing charm is to help a conjurer reach a peculiar psychological state. One can agree with the view of S. J. Tambiah, who characterizes such self-stimulation as a progression “from the word to thought, then to the notion of power, and ended with the deed” (1968:175). The immediate target of the word’s influence in the charm is apparently the conjurer, not the patient, as is proved for instance by the fact that the charm—which often happens to constitute zealously guarded secret knowledge—can be articulated, in the presence of a patient, as a whisper or as a half-whispered, half-chanted utterance, with singular vocal emphases. Another proof of this primary influence is the fact that the actual presence of a patient often is not obligatory for the effective performance of *zagovor* (as in the case of bewitching the water and/or other things used in curing). Direct appeals to a patient are usually absent in the incantation of *zagovor*.

In its role as a means of such self-stimulation of a conjurer, the word has several functions, and intonation proves different in each case. First, the word can describe, comment upon, and in general accompany the physical actions of a conjurer in the process of curing:

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|----|---------------------------------|--|
| a) | Dúyu,<br>plúyu,<br>pómoši dayu. | I am blowing,<br>I’m spitting<br>I’m lending help. |
| b) | Gyrz’ gryzú,<br>vygryzáyu.      | I’m gnawing the rupture,<br>I’m gnawing it out.    |

The role of intonation is in this case minimal.

Second, the word can define the psychological state of a conjurer through some magical evocative actions with respect to mythological objects. Achieving the desired goal is realized in this case by fulfilling such intentions as:

- 1) mild request
- 2) demand
- 3) appeal, invocation
- 4) relevant emotional state

The role of intonation as a means of self-stimulation is in this case

increased.

Thus, *mild request* is expressed by weakening the loudness contrast between the phrase accent and unaccented vowels while pronouncing the imperative construction at a higher tone level than usual. Note that the motive of the mild request usually comes across only in the fragments of *zagovory* texts where there is no opportunity for active, personal influence by a conjurer upon a situation, for example in appeals to God or to God’s Mother:

- |    |                                    |  |
|----|------------------------------------|--|
| a) | Vóspodi,<br>pomoží i poblagosloví. | My Lord,<br>help me and bless me.        |
| b) | Utolí Bože boli Valentiny.         | Allay, my God,<br>the pain of Valentina. |

The *demand* is articulated by augmenting the loudness contrast between the phrase accent and unaccented vowels while pronouncing the imperative construction. One of two motives is customarily involved:

- a) banishment (“go away”) — addressed to illness:

Idý sobe, de voron kósti ne zanose.	Go your own way, there, where the raven does not bring the bones.
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- b) the demand for assistance (“help,” “cover,” “safeguard”) — addressed to superior forces:

Vstán’t’a pristupit’a moy dúkh polubit’a.	Rise up, come here, love my spirit.
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The *appeal or invocation* is expressed by strengthening the loudness contrast between the phrase accent and unaccented vowels, as well as by increasing the length of a phrase accent in vocative and nominative constructions:

- |    |                                       |   |
|----|---------------------------------------|---|
| a) | Dubóčok u boru,<br>ja do tébe govoru. | Oak in the dark forest,<br>I talk to you. |
| b) | Ríčen’ka,<br>vodýca,<br>mátuška.      | You river,<br>you water,<br>you mother.   |

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|----|--|--|
| c) | Večírni zori,<br>polunóčni zori,<br>svetóvye zori. | You night-summer lightnings,<br>you midnight-summer lightnings,<br>you dawn-summer lightnings. |
|----|--|--|

The appeal or invocation can also be obliquely indicated in *zagovor*, for instance by enumeration of actions and features associated with the invoked disease:

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|----|--|--|
| a) | Zenócky,<br>devócky,<br>muščýn'sky,<br>khlópecky,<br>sobáčy,<br>kot'ácy,<br>podúmany,<br>pogadány. | You from women,<br>you from girls,<br>you from men,<br>you from lads,<br>you from dogs,<br>you from cats,<br>you from thought,<br>you from charming. |
| b) | Tady ty stoyál,<br>kolól,<br>poról.  | Then you stood,<br>you pricked,<br>you ripped.   |

Each rhythmic group similar in pronunciation to the vocative constructions shows that such fragments unambiguously signal the invocation. The oblique expression of appeal can be performed as narration:

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| a) | Mísec molody,<br>u tebe ríg zoloty,<br>ty žyveš vysóko,<br>ty bačyš dal'óko.                      | You new moon,<br>you have a golden corn,<br>you live high above,<br>you can see far and wide.                     |
| b) | Na ostrove Buyáne,<br>na sv'atom Okyáne,<br>stoit dúb.<br>Pod etim dúbom<br>ležit zmeyá Kolupeya. | On the island Buyan,<br>on the saint Okyan,<br>there stands an oak.<br>Under this oak<br>lies the snake Kolupeya. |

The rhythmic groups in such textual fragments are also intoned like vocative constructions.

The *emotional state*, involving strongly willed moral pressure, is expressed by partitioning the text in the course of utterance into short, similar rhythmic groups with similar intonation, typical of imperatives:

- |                      |                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Zhan'éyu<br>strakhý, | I'm getting away<br>the fears, |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|

ps'áčy,	those from dogs,
kot'áčy,	those from cats,
vatránye,	those from wind,
planítnye.	those from planets.
Ne khodý,	Don't come here,
ne sušý	don't gnaw
senej	the blue
žýly,	vine,
žóltoj	the yellow
kostí,	bone,
červónoj	the red
kroví,	blood,
bílogo	the white
téla.	body.

In the appropriate mood the conjurer can pronounce any fragment of the text of *zagovor* in this a way. Intonation in this case is something like a *cliché mélodique* that is superimposed upon the text.

The word as a means of self-stimulation of the conjurer also manifests itself in the fascinating function of a physical irritant that affects one's sense-organs<sup>1</sup> (in this case a performer's sense-organs). Under favorable conditions, action of a rhythmic, momentary, shocking irritant can provoke a number of psychic states that are considered abnormal. Certain traditional devices used by a conjurer when pronouncing *zagovor* are linked to this peculiar feature. Here intonation is the major means. Significantly, those conjurers who have mastered the art of charming not from the oral tradition but from written sources (such a method of learning *zagovor* is becoming more popular in recent years) do not use these devices in their uttering. This discrepancy proves that such devices are purely cultural, acquired only from oral tradition.

The most widely used device is voice-leading on one tone level with articulation of all vowels at the same pitch, or two-level voice-leading with rhythmic transformation of one tone level into another (and/or of one timber into another). Such intonation often can be accompanied by a characteristic increase of speech tempo. In this case intonation is deprived of its usual speech semantics and in its function becomes more like that of a tune or primitive melody. One can hypothesize the presence of primitive

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<sup>1</sup> On the function of fascination in speech, cf. Knorozov 1973.

musical mode relations here.<sup>2</sup> It is this very type of intoning that is easy to identify for anyone who has ever experienced the living performance of a charm; the distinctive feature is evidently the specific tempo of pronouncing.<sup>3</sup>

This type of utterance is often regarded by a conjurer as a sign of stepping into the specific state corresponding to the performative act of charming. To strengthen the rhythmic effect, the conjurer can add such actions as swaying, rhythmically waving the hands, or rhythmically manipulating appropriate items (a knife, for example). In this connection one cannot ignore the strong influence produced on the patient by rhythmical movements of this kind in combination with vocal sounds and the general ambience. Among the devices acting as a shocking irritant may be included the momentary or rhythmic exclamation, as found in the Kaluga region.

This function is linked to an orientation toward creating the strange, peculiar word, toward the difficulty of its pronunciation. It is impractical to attempt a complete list of devices, as well as to decide whether each such device is the unique product of an individual or acquired from tradition.

It is necessary to mention that intonation in a single, steady tune is artificial and psychologically unnatural.<sup>4</sup> Two-level voice-leading accompanied by a significant rise in speech tempo is also connected with difficulty of pronunciation, which can be increased by periodic “whisper pauses,” that is, pronouncing of one, two, or a whole succession of syllables during breath intake or without the voice.

Another related device used in *zagovor* performance consists of pronunciation with the constant shift of the accent to the beginning of a rhythmic group:

Paydu pad čístoye nebo,  
pad čístye zv’ozdy,  
tám na Mikrone  
stáit belyj kamen’.

I’ll go under the clear sky,  
under the clear stars,  
there on the Mikron  
there stands a white stone.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Knodratyeva 1977.

<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to verify whether the rhythm of such a rendering is related to the main alpha-rhythm of the human brain. On the influence of similar rhythms on the human psychology in ceremonies with percussion instruments, cf. Sturtevant 1968, Jackson 1968, and Neher 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Alexeev 1986, on using this device in magic rituals.

Na bélom kamne  
stáit Božaya Mat'.  
Ona déržit v rukakh  
žyivotvórnyj Krest.  
Ona im ograždáyet  
zemlu i nebo.

On the white stone  
stands God's Mother  
She has in her hands  
the life-creating Cross.  
She circumscribes with it  
the earth and the skies.

Among other devices of this kind are the obligatory clear and distinctive pronunciation of all consonants (therefore, as the conjurers insist, the performer must possess all of his or her teeth; otherwise the words “fly through”); pronouncing of the whole charm in one breath; and pronouncing the charm with rising speech tempo.

Of the devices connected with the function of estrangement one can distinguish a special group of various kinds of imitations. There are mimings of hen's cackling in charms intended to cure the child from crying at night for example, or of eating sounds when the rupture is conceived of as being “gnawed out” by the conjurer.

One of the most popular of such devices is imitation of liturgical pronunciation. The conjurer can imitate the priest's exclamations from the altar or use a tonal register featuring the clausulae fixed on a single tone level, a style that typifies the recitation of canonical prayers as part of church practice. The popularity of this device can be explained in several ways. First, the canonical prayers always accompany the charms intoned in the process of curing; they are usually recited before the charm. Second, if Christian personae are invoked or if the foundation is spiritual verse, the charm itself often functions under the name of a prayer. Transferring the devices used to intone the prayer onto the recitation of a charm seems quite natural in this context. Third, pronouncing with fixed-tune clausulae has much in common with intoning on one level of accented vowels, this latter feature being, as we have seen, typical for a charm. The only difference is that in the prayer the characteristic melodic movement involves the final 3-4 syllables of a rhythmic group, while in the charm it includes the entire rhythmic group.

The devices of intonation linked to the function of fascination are surely the most highly expressive (and in many cases also the most archaic) means in the performer's repertoire, marking the transition from speech to *zagovor*. As mentioned above, it is the use of these features that designates for many conjurers the onset of the act of charming. Articulation of *zagovor* is, however, rarely accomplished only with the help of “fascination” signals. The conjurer usually strives to employ all of the means at his or her disposal to achieve the charm's goal. The word as a

means of self-stimulation in all its functions also figures prominently in the course of incantation. In any given moment, this or that function may dominate, depending on the conjurer's mood.

The performer usually repeats the *zagovor* text, with variations and resetting of incantations, three, nine, or twelve times in the process of charming. Each of the iterations is a new intonational variant, with disparities arising from the shift of dominant function. In the majority of cases the conjurer begins the utterance using the devices associated with fascination; then he or she turns to the other functions of the word, periodically returning to the opening strategy. Thus the devices associated with fascination mark not only the outer boundaries of a charming act, but also its inner boundaries, its phases. The conjurer usually closes the utterance with the devices of fascination, and in this case the influence of these devices on the patient can manifest itself quite directly. The words addressed to the patient—"Rise up, you healthy one," "God give you happiness, health," and so forth—can serve as a continuation of this influence. But with such addresses we already reach beyond the boundaries of a charm performance.

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