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**Skaz Rulz:  
(Re-)Oralisation of Contemporary British Fiction**

Many novels and short stories written from 1980s onwards paradoxically read as if they were spoken. This type of narration can especially be observed in broadly understood British fiction, examples ranging from such critically acclaimed contemporary “classics” as Martin Amis’s *Money* or Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* to not so high-brow texts, for instance Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* or James Hawes’s *A White Merc with Fins*. In narrative studies the term *skaz* is employed in reference to this narrative form; hence its appearance in the title of my paper in the colloquial phrase, the spelling of which is obviously a written imitation of spoken language. The popularity of the *skaz* form suggests that we can talk about oralisation of contemporary British fiction: compared to fiction written in the 1950s or 1960s, it seems to comprise a much greater number of texts written in this pseudo-oral mode. Or rather, we should talk about re-oralisation: as suggested by Monika Fludernik, the

process discussed in the present paper can be interpreted as a return to oral roots of narrative as such (Fludernik 1996: 178-179).

It might be expected that the widespread use of pseudo-oral narration means that the orality of modern fiction has been thoroughly theorised; however, this is not the case. It is only Irene Kacandes that notices the emergence of “speech-inspired” fiction in twentieth-century literature: assuming that the central function of speech is to create relationships and to invite interaction, she proposes the category of *talk fiction* as “a label for works of twentieth-century narrative literature that promote a sense of relationship and exchange in readers that we normally associate with face-to-face interaction” (Kacandes 2001: 1). As can be seen, her understanding of talk fiction is very broad and comprises all texts which display orientation to exchange, Kacandes going so far as to highlight the fact that talk-fiction texts do not rely on mere imitation of the peculiar characteristics of the spoken discourse (Kacandes 2001: 23). Indeed, the addressivity of a given novel can be manifested by various textual means; however, it is precisely by imitating properties of speech that the novels in the *skaz* mode very effectively create the illusion of oral exchange. Furthermore, they seem to constitute an especially prominent tendency in contemporary British fiction, which can naturally be construed as belonging to Kacandes’s broad category of talk fiction.

The notion of *skaz* appears in a number of narratological studies, but they usually just mention it without specifying its distinctive features or refer the reader to works of two Russian Formalists, Boris Eikhenbaum and Viktor Vinogradov (Prince 1987: 88, Stanzel 1984: 10). They did indeed introduce the term *skaz*, originally applied to a genre of Russian folk literature, as a designation for the narrative method whereby a written text is endowed with an oral quality. However, seminal as their studies are, they have an introductory character and basically apply the category of *skaz* to written texts which bear at least some traces of orality.

Eikhenbaum argues that many writers try to preserve in their writing the spontaneous aspect of the creative process and to make their texts look as if they were improvised stories. One of basic

devices whereby they achieve this effect is, according to him, the use of sound effects. In such texts the figure of the narrator as well as his/her manner of speaking seem to determine all other elements of the story. The narrator seems to be improvising: he/she emphasises that he/she does not remember very well all the details, adds some digressions and, last but not least, plays with the language throughout the text of the story (Eikhenbaum 1970: 487-490).

Vinogradov, in turn, emphasises that *skaz* should be understood as an artistic equivalent of one form of monologic use of language in speech. He argues that in our spoken monologues we try to imitate the logical and coherent structure of written monologues. However, we are never completely successful: we make pauses, lose the track of our thoughts, make some emotional comments, address our listeners, repeat ourselves, make some mistakes etc. It is the presence of all these elements of the spoken monologue that distinguishes the *skaz* from other literary forms and that creates the illusion of a spontaneous speech being recorded in writing. Just like Eikhenbaum, Vinogradov underlines the fact that the style of a given *skaz* is closely related to the figure of the narrator, his/her social status, personality and such like; consequently, the stylistic elements that appear in it must fit, so to speak, the narrator (Vinogradov 1937).

As can be seen, the notion of the *skaz* in its original Russian Formalist meaning can be applied to a wide spectrum of texts, ranging from stories which simply employ auditory effects through those which emphasise their communicative nature to dramatic monologues of narrators of a specific social origin. Its current usage suggests a more limited sense, aptly expressed in Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, which offers the following definition of *skaz*: "a narrative fashioned to give the illusion of spontaneous speech" (Prince 1987: 88). The *skaz* thus understood is related to what W. D. Stempel calls everyday narrative (Stempel 1986: 203-216), that is the type of narrative we all produce in interactions with other people. Seen from that perspective, the *skaz* does not necessarily contain all the elements analysed by Eikhenbaum or Vinogradov. For instance, the

employment of auditory effects or puns does not seem to be required for the text to look like a record of improvised speech.

Contemporary examples of texts in the *skaz* mode comprise three basic elements, which, when combined together, create the illusion of spontaneous speech. Firstly, the figure of the narrator is a central element of a given text and the reader's attention focuses as much on the story itself as on the person who is telling it and the manner in which he/she is telling it. Secondly, in this narrative mode the narrator's discourse comprises a very characteristic component of spoken discourse: frequent addresses to the listener. Finally, the sequence in which the events are presented reflects the order in which the narrator remembers, perceives or imagines them, thus creating an illusion of an improvised speech, which is not governed by the formal logic of writing.

As regards the first of these elements, in contemporary instances of *skaz* the style in which a given narrator is "speaking" is usually modelled on a vernacular variety of English and uses vocabulary and sentence structures typical of the spoken language. Consider the following examples:

- (1) The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, trying no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video. (Welsh 2003: 3)
- (2) How about that Caduta, though, eh? Mind you, if you think she behaved strangely, you should have seen me. I had an incredible crying jag. (Amis 1985: 108)
- (3) I once got this old hippie to hypnotise me to see if I had any Hidden Memory Syndrome that might explain why I am such a waster and would rather have my legs sawn off than do a steady job, I was sort of hoping I had been traumatised, so I would have someone to blame. It turned out I did have loads of forgotten memories, who hasn't for Christ's sake? Except they were all good ones, they were all about teddy-bears and Christmas and stuff: my mind was an abuse-free zone. (Hawes 1996: 15-16)

Naturally, in many cases a text in the *skaz* form will use the spelling supposed to reflect the variety of English a given text is modelled on, as happens, for instance, in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, from which

the first passage comes, or will include onomatopoeic interjections, as happens in the second passage, from Martin Amis's *Money*.

Interestingly, not all the texts in the *skaz* format utilise a highly colloquial variety of English. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is probably the best example of a pseudo-oral narrative written in very stiff and formal English. Consider the following quotation, taken from the opening pages of the novel:

I regret to report that once the purchase had been completed, there was little I could do for Mr Farraday to prevent all [servants] but Mrs Clements leaving for other employment. When I wrote to my new employer conveying my regrets at the situation, I received by reply from America instructions to recruit a new staff 'worthy of a grand old English house'. I immediately set about trying to fulfil Mr Farraday's wishes, but as you know, finding recruits of a satisfactory standard is no easy task nowadays. (Ishiguro 1990: 12)

As can be seen, the characteristic feature of the narrator's manner of speaking is the use of formal phrases, such as "I regret to report" or "conveying my regrets at the situation." Naturally, they usually appear in the written context; however, *The Remains of the Day* can still be construed as an example of *skaz*. What endows this novel with a pseudo-oral character is the frequency with which the narrator evokes the addressee to whom he directs his monologue, the phrase "as you know" being one of many examples.

Such addresses to the narratee are another very characteristic component of all contemporary instances of *skaz*. It might even be argued that they are the element that distinguishes the *skaz* from other forms of narration. The use of idiosyncratic or colloquial register mentioned above can, for instance, be observed in the stream of consciousness. However, in the case of this narrative technique the narrator is not directly evoking any addressee, as happens in the *skaz*.

The evocation of the narratee can take a number of forms in texts in the *skaz* mode. Most of them abound, first of all, in phatic expressions, emphasising that the narrator is directing his/her narrative to somebody with whom he/she wants to retain contact:

(1) This barn, you see, had been converted into a working research laboratory. (McGrath 1990: 29)

- (2) Penny's easy. I don't mean, you know, *easy* . . . (Hornby 2000: 131)
- (3) As you might expect, I did not take Mr Farraday's suggestion at all seriously that afternoon. (Ishiguro 1990: 4)

Naturally, the passages directed to the narratee can be much more elaborate: in the *skaz* the narrators use all types of conative expressions, trying to impress or threaten or entertain the narratee, to mention just a few possibilities.

Frequent addresses to the narratee emphasise the immediacy of contact between narrator and narratee. This illusion of immediacy is heightened by the use of direct questions and question tags, which seem to call for an immediate response:

- (1) I hit a topless bar on Forty-Fourth. Ever check out one of these joints? (Amis 1985: 131)
- (2) Look at the likes of Mr Marshall, say, or Mr Lane – surely two of the greatest figures in our profession. Can we imagine Mr Marshall arguing with Lord Camberley over the latter's latest dispatch to the Foreign Office? (Ishiguro 1990: 211)
- (3) But perhaps you think I'm making all this up, perhaps you think these the delusions of a diseased imagination. Explain to me why, then, if Fledge had not seduced Harriet, and thus bent her to his will, she made no protest when he turned my wheelchair to the wall? (McGrath 1990: 81)

The above passages attribute to the narratee the role of an active interlocutor, who is supposed to respond to the narrator's words; or rather, they create the illusion of the narratee's active participation, since in all the cases the narrator's discourse does not register the narratee's immediate reaction.

The presence of these textual elements creates the illusion of the narrator talking to somebody. However, it does not mean that an "actual" act of oral transmission necessarily takes place on the level of the presented world. The narratives in the *skaz* mode frequently include no signals on the basis of which the narrative situation could be reconstructed or the narratee's presence at the narrator's side determined. There are, for instance, no indications of visual or physical contact between these two agents. Naturally, the effect thus

achieved is that of the reader identifying with the “you” and feeling directly addressed by the narrator “talking” to him/her.

Some narratives in the *skaz* form ostentatiously preclude the possibility of direct communication between the narrator and a listener concretised on the level of the presented world. Patrick McGrath’s *The Grotesque* is, for instance, narrated by a narrator who is paralysed and unable to talk to people surrounding him, though he can apparently hear them and reflect on his own situation. Paradoxically enough, he addresses the explanation of his condition to the “you” of the narratee:

Take this, for instance: “Damage to the posterior sectors of the inferior frontal convolution of the patient’s left hemisphere may have been the cause of the disintegration of his capacity for speech.” It was my damaged convolution they [the doctors] were referring to here . . . (McGrath 1990: 15-16)

This passage demonstrates that the evocation of the addressee in the *skaz* sometimes needs to be construed as a certain fictional convention adopted by the author (who creates the narrator and his/her manner of narration) and not in the mimetic terms of a transcription of an actual oral exchange which has taken place in the fictional world.

On the other hand, a number of novels in the *skaz* mode will include elements allowing reconstruction of the narratee being addressed and the circumstances of the narrative act. Consider the following passage from Graham Swift’s *Waterland*:

I know what you think when you sit in your rows, in attitudes of boredom, listlessness, resentment, forbearance, desultory concentration. Before you a balding quinquagenarian who gabbles about the Ancien Régime, Rousseau, Diderot and the insolvency of the French Crown; behind you, beyond the window, grey winter light, an empty playground, forlorn and misty tower blocks. (Swift 1984: 51)

This passage suggests that the communicative situation posited in *Waterland* is that of a middle-aged teacher addressing a class of reluctant pupils.

The third distinctive feature of *skaz* is its loose, digressive temporal structure. Paradoxically, the illusion of spontaneous speech is frequently generated by the narrators’ self-conscious comments on

their own propensity to digress. As in everyday narratives (Stempel 1986: 213), narrators in the *skaz* mode spontaneously correct themselves and attempt to control the flow of their narratives, frequently interrupted by random associations. This property of the *skaz* is especially prominent in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and McGrath's *The Grotesque*, both of which focus on the fallible memories of their narrators. They abound in expressions signalling the narrator's awareness that he/she is speaking to somebody who may have problems following his/her train of thought:

- (1) However, let me return to my original thread. (Ishiguro 1990: 20)
- (2) I'm rambling. Sometimes it's an effort to keep everything in order. The reason is, that as I sit here brooding in my cave beneath the stairs, I suddenly detect fresh patterns of significance in the events that have occurred in Crook since the autumn, and these emerging patterns, if I'm not careful, play havoc with my chronology. (McGrath 1990: 70)

The passages of that type underline the fact that the narrator does not follow a simple linear pattern; the sequence in which the events are presented reflects the sequence in which he/she remembers them and the narrative develops as it is enunciated.

In the majority of novels mentioned above, the *skaz* technique is used consistently throughout the text, but obviously sometimes the *skaz* mode will be juxtaposed with other types of narration, as happens, for instance, in Welsh's *Trainspotting*, which combines pseudo-oral passages with interior monologues and sections narrated from the omniscient point of view. Even more interesting are the cases of novels which introduce a clash between writing and speaking. This is what happens, for instance, in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*. The very first lines of the novel establish the tension between writing and speech; the narrator begins his narrative with the direct address to the judge – “My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say.” (Banville 1990: 3) On the one hand, the words “this is what I shall say” suggest that the reader is reading a record of a courtroom speech; on the other, the use of the future form indicates that the narrator is preparing his speech,



not delivering it. What is more, further on in the text he explicitly refers to the written form of his testimony:

He [another character] was my friend. Such a simple phrase and yet how affecting. I don't think I have ever used it before. When I *wrote* it down I had to pause, startled. (Banville 1990: 33, emphasis mine)

At the same time the text of the novel displays all the characteristic properties of the *skaz* convention. The narrator's "script" seems to be a record of a spontaneous, unpremeditated speech. Not only does he constantly digress or correct himself, he even seems to include in his script an address to a court clerk taking notes of his speech:

... always when I saw her [his wife] naked I wanted to caress her, as I would want to caress a piece of sculpture, hefting the curves in the hollow of my hand, running a thumb down the long smooth lines, feeling the coolness, the velvet texture of the stone. *Clerk, strike the last sentence, it will seem to mean too much.* (Banville 1990: 8)

The only verisimilar explanation for the appearance of a passage like the one quoted above is that the narrator imagines himself in court and puts down in writing all the ideas which come to his mind without selecting or controlling them in any way. In other words, his self-conscious aim seems to be the creation of a written representation of "living" speech.

Just as writing and speech enter into a peculiar relationship in *The Book of Evidence*, a somewhat paradoxical relationship obtains between the *skaz* and narratives typical of primary oral cultures, that is cultures which do not know any form of writing. On the one hand, the massive deployment of *skaz* can be construed as a return to oral roots of narrative. On the other, the *skaz* does not seem to display characteristics of a narrative form associated with primary oral cultures, namely an epic. In fact, one might even say that the loose, apparently illogical structure of the *skaz* is the opposite of oral literature with its fixed formulas and the effacement of the speaking "I" (cf. Ong 1982: 33-36), though, obviously, literature understood as a body of written texts and the oral tradition are related to each other in many ways, the description of which would go far beyond the scope of the present paper.

Monika Fludernik has suggested that the use of pseudo-oral discourse is a characteristic feature of what she calls ethnic literature (Fludernik 1996: 179). Indeed, a number of post-colonial novels employ the *skaz* technique, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* being a case in point. At first sight this novel seems to be an example of a typical framed structure. The *Arabian Nights* being one of its intertexts, *Midnight's Children* presents an act of oral communication: Saleem, the narrator, is telling the story of his life inseparably interwoven with the history of India to his female companion, Padma. The only problem is that he is also writing a book directed to the "you" of the reader in which he describes his own act of storytelling and his listener, Padma. Thus, just as in *The Book of Evidence* the narrative situation projected in *Midnight's Children* involves the clash between oral and written forms of communication, which can naturally be read as a reflection of the conflict between indigenous narrative forms, preferred by illiterate Padma, and the Western literary tradition Saleem's literary project evokes.

Well-suited for exploration of post-colonial issues the *skaz* technique may be; however, it cannot be exclusively correlated with them. The examples of the novels discussed above prove that the spectrum of conventions in which it can appear ranges, to give just a few examples, from magic realism of Rushdie, through psychological novels of Ishiguro and Gothic fantasies of McGrath to lad lit of Hornby or Hawes. The wide variety of genres in which the *skaz* technique is employed demonstrates that it is merely a certain literary technique, not necessarily bound up with particular thematic concerns or literary conventions.

It is perhaps too sweeping a generalisation but it seems that the popularity of the *skaz* can be related to a general tendency to reject so-called third-person, objective narrators in favour of first-person, subjective narrators. In his essay on Graham Swift and Julian Barnes David Leon Higdon points out that "[these two writers] have affirmed the resurgence of the first-person novel in postmodern fiction" (Higdon 1991: 174). Furthermore, widespread employment of the *skaz* technique seems to tie in with re-oralisation, at least partial, of

contemporary culture. Kacandes relates the emergence of talk fiction to what Walter Ong has identified as secondary orality of contemporary culture, i.e. orality built, or rather grafted, upon literacy and fostered by technological progress in such media as television or radio (Ong 1982: 136-137). One element of this secondary orality is a high premium set on directness, spontaneity and immediacy, and narratives in the *skaz* mode perfectly embody all these features.

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