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## Gossiping and Speculating in the Folk Culture of Strushki Drimkol\*

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Gossiping is defined as a type of everyday communication that includes spreading information about other people without their knowledge or approval and without them being present during the conversation. While sharing our own experience with others, very often we are retelling other people's stories simply because of our regular daily interactions with others. According to that, a large part of everyday communication includes gossiping. In that sense it is important to point out that this type of communication is not only typical for the region where we conducted the research, because every one of us gossips even when we strongly try not to.

Gossiping and modifying the transmitted information are closely connected processes of communicating. Allport and Postman used three terms in order to describe the spreading of rumours: levelling represents losing of certain details throughout the transmitting process; sharpening is about selecting certain details that are being transmitted; and assimilation is about modifying the information during the transmitting process as the result of subconscious motivations (Allport and Postman 1948). Significant parts of daily communication consists of gossiping, so therefore a significant part of the stories / narrations that are told to the researcher during their field work also contains gossip. In that sense we have to point out that when people talk about their lives they sometimes lie, they forget a little, they exaggerate, get confused, and misunderstand things (Sangster 1998: 87-98). However, these arguments are not implying that their interpretations should be treated as untruthful, but it means that by knowing the mechanisms of interpreting we would eventually gain better insight into the processes of construction and configuration of events that have been personally experienced or those heard from other people. »There was nothing more powerful or

important than ongoing interpretations in sum because these acts demonstrated that the notion of a single true world was a fable; all human life was a construct of the particular individual employment of symbolic systems.« (Rapport and Overing 2005: 211)

Assumptions are especially significant in the process of gossiping and are closely connected to it. When the individual is accepting the information, it is transmitted through the personal reference system or through the personal system of knowledge. This practice is especially typical when it comes to accepting unclear or blurred information. Transmitting the information through ones own system of knowledge serves for better understanding of the information and for relating to it as a whole. It also serves for constructing a scenario using the logic that is already accessible to the person. This kind of construction can be based on a single piece of information to which assumptions can be attached. It is a clear fact that the told stories are never the same with the heard stories or: two or more persons assign different meanings to identical information (Rogers 1994). According to that, one story can never be the same story for all the people. Everyone will add a slightly different point because of the fact that two experiences can never be completely the same; everyone will reform it in his / hers own way and everyone will accept it through his / hers own feelings for it.

But against rumour there are little or no checks and the original story, true or invented, grows wings and horns, hoofs and beaks, as the artist in each gossip works upon it. The first narrator's account does not keep its shape and proportions. It is edited and revised by all who played with it as they heard it, used it for day dreams, and passed it on. (Lippman 1921)

\* Strushki Drimkol is a region in the western Macedonia, near the border with the Republic of Albania. The research was conducted in the villages inhabited with Macedonians Christians and Muslims.

In this context it is important to point out that participating or being present during some event doesn't mean that only in such case we are dealing with the true or the original story, or the fact that there are certain mistakes

in the perception again limits the classification of the interpretations as true or false.

According to the expressions that are used during gossiping (such as: it has been said, the village was saying, it has been heard, the people were talking, etc.) the source of the assumptions and speculations can never be located because the responsibility for assuming and speculating, as well as distorting of reality is in the hands of the community. That is why the person who is assuming or who is passing on the speculations is freed from the responsibility about this practice, or there are no limitations on the individual level whatsoever. Besides awareness about possible distortion when passing information from one person to another, it is still not an obstacle for the information to be accepted by the majority of people and to be used while retelling the story. In the process of gossiping improvisation, exaggerating and distorting of information is very typical and the informants are fully aware about this practice. Having in mind the characteristics of interpretations and according to the fact that gossiping is in fact interpreting, we are supporting the relativity when it comes to discovering the "truth", or we are supporting the relativity of the term "truth" itself. »Conversation has no truth to discover, no proposition to prove, no conclusion to seek; reason is neither sovereign nor primary and there is no accumulating inquiry or body of information to safeguard.« (Rapport and Overing 2005: 89)

Assumptions by retelling can gain a status of facts very easily because in the process of gossiping a person who is receiving the information can but does not have to be careful about whether it is a personal assumption, or confirmed information. It means that very often the process of gossiping is not concerned with searching for the exact evidence or arguments or by some demand for checking received information. When people are not directed by the objective evidence, they are predicting according to the subjective priorities (Allport and Postman 1948: 44). Because of the fact that a person included in the process of gossiping is not restricted in giving or adding different assumptions and this process can not be controlled on an individual level, the most important norm is the maintenance of the »golden balance« as the most efficient way for avoiding the danger of being gossiped about. »Lj: As we say, it is important not to be in peoples mouths. Everyone will say what they want. Can you forbid them to do that? No, you can not.«<sup>1</sup>

There is a great interest about actions of others. This interest is especially present when it comes to actions

that are obviously not corresponding with the norms for proper behavior. The daughter of the informant who lives in the nearby town heard on television the initials of some prostitute that was identified as a girl from the village. Then she called her mother on the phone to ask if the identity of this girl has already been revealed in the village. »M: She called last night: - mother - she said - in the town somewhere they found some girl, and boys were visiting her. The woman that rented the apartment to this girl was named Mara, Marica. (...) It is a girl from this village. They only said two letters. (...) And so she called me and asked: - mother, do you know who is she? - No, I don't know the letters.« In this story there are lots of gaps according to the amount and the quality of the information, as we can see from the beginning of the story: »in the town somewhere they found some girl ...«, that illustrates a great uncertainty in the identity (some girl, they), and the location (somewhere). According to some authors gossiping generally is based on the lack of information (Allport and Postman 1948: 1). What is certain if we are following the story, is the name of the woman who rented the apartment, that the girl who is identified as a prostitute is from the village, and that the two letters mentioned should represent the initials of the first name and surname of this girl. This lack of information will not stop the informants from coming back to this story later on, but as the time goes by from the first interpretation of the story, the information that is identified as clear will also change. Later on in the conversation the informant mentions this story again: »M: Now I am interested who the girl is. Is she a Turk<sup>2</sup>, is she a Christian? The lady that rented the apartment to this girl is named Marica.« This time we have even closer identification of the lady, such as: »grandmother ... aunt Mara«.<sup>3</sup> Later on, the lady that rented the apartment will have a new name, and the girl - prostitute will finally have the initials. »M: I only remembered the letter J and the letter L, I think, I don't know. She said - mother, they said that the girl is from the village. And that woman who rented the apartment to the girl was named aunt Zora (...). Zora said: - I have rented the apartment to her so she can live there. How should I know what they were doing inside?« Now the informant is manipulating the information more regarding the statement of the lady that rented the apartment, and so the story is becoming more realistic through this process. Later on, the informant is repeating the same information, so it seems that the story is becoming clearer for the people involved in this discussion. »M: She only told me some

2 The term Turks is applied on the Macedonian Muslim population in the region of Strushki Drimkol.

3 Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 2, Informant: M. - woman, born in 1928, orthodox Christian.

1 Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 7, Informant: Lj. - woman, born in 1932, orthodox Christian

letters, but I didn't understand who she is. She mentioned the letters J and L. She said: - they didn't mention the full name, only two letters, and they said that the girl is from our village, and that aunt Zora has rented her the apartment. «<sup>4</sup> The assumptions in the next moment are told more surely so when retelling the story to the other person it is possible these assumptions to be shared in a form of facts. Usually, besides the involvement of assumptions and speculations in the process of story telling, it is typical for information to be distorted, added, and changed. »F: *And after, everyone is adding more than should be added, as we say. Even if it wasn't like that, people will make it like that.* «<sup>5</sup>

The process of manipulating information is happening even when there is no obvious reason for it. For example, neighbours are responsible for spreading disinformation about the informants' husbands' cause of death. From this point, from the neighbourhood, the disinformation is spread through the village as a wider community, so in this stage it is impossible to control the information flow. The need of shaping the information by the community's will is very interesting, even when this practice is not changing the situation at all. In this example, the informant's husband fell off the chair in the yard (in front of the witnesses); he broke his hip and died a few months after the surgery at the age of 70. Neighbours consider the next situation as more interesting; they say that the man fell from the stairs of his old house, so this story is spread because the stairs in the old house are considered dangerous to use. Besides the fact that they had the opportunity to hear the story from the dead men's wife, the neighbourhood is not giving up their version of the story. The informant is surprised by this persuasiveness because she considers the story of her husband's death as not that provoking of an event, one that doesn't need hiding or distorting of information. »U: *But this is not something to hide. Whether he fell from the stairs, or anywhere else, it is not something to hide.* « When she confronted the neighbours, she suggested they consult the witnesses present in the yard when her husband fell. But the other side of this story doesn't consider the checking of information as provocative enough. According to the informant, information that seems completely irrelevant is especially important for the »village women« because of the stereotype that gossiping is reserved as a female form of communication. Gossip deals with many assumptions and the people who are the subject of gossip are using assumptions to identify those who are responsible for

encouraging the gossip: »U: *Whether Maria said it, whether those people said it... and that's it, words are spreading*«. Further on in the conversation, these assumptions can gain the status of facts, and in the next moment gossipers are identified by their names: »U: *The village said so, Kata, Bogejca, all the people here said so*«. <sup>6</sup>

The process of transmitting the information through ones' own personal system of knowledge is especially typical when villagers are dealing with "medical diagnoses". People from older generations are very interested about the health condition and especially about the health problems of the villagers. Assumptions in this case are related to medical problems that are partially or not at all understandable for the people. Medical explanations are often inspired by the experiences of other people. For example if some diabetic from the village eats a lot of bread, that implies that all the diabetics are eating a lot of bread, so one of the symptoms for diabetes is eating a lot of bread. »Ma: *Gjokojca can't get enough of eating. If you give her a loaf of bread, she will eat the whole thing. Diabetics are eating a lot of bread. You didn't know this?* « Or: »M: *Don't eat that much sugar, stop it! That is why you are feeling sick!* Ma: *No, you are wrong!* M: *I am not wrong. This is bad too. Sugar might go in your eyes. There is some dry sugar.* Ma: *But I did a medical exam, I don't have diabetes.* M: *Never mind that. There is a dry sugar. I hear that from the Turkish women.* Ma: *OK. If it is a dry sugar, I should eat and ask for bread. But I am not doing that*«. <sup>7</sup> In this particular case of assuming and speculating we can recognize another very typical human aspect – the need to classify things. Classification serves the need for more concrete identification by people of their bodily circumstances their selves and those of significant others; natural analogies, perhaps are used to make more concrete, graspable and therefore resolvable what is inchoate in psycho – social experience and relationship. (Rapport and Overing 2005: 38)

The examples presented in this article are chosen because of their minimalism and simplicity in explaining the processes of gossiping and speculating in terms of particular people and particular situations. Therefore, the simplicity of the examples should be regarded only as such, meaning not to be valued in any case in an intellectual manner because the same simple and banal assumptions are typical not only in this narrow case of the study which is limited to a rural area somewhere in Macedonia. The next quote will explain this better:

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 5, Informant: M. - woman, born in 1928, orthodox Christian.

<sup>5</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 10, Informant: F. - girl, 17 years old, Muslim.

<sup>6</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 1, Informant: U. - woman, born in 1927, orthodox Christian.

<sup>7</sup> Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Skopje, Audiotape number 25, Informant: M. - woman, born in 1928, Ma: woman, 75 years old, orthodox Christians.

Take for instance the minimal verbalization: »The baby cried. The mommy picked it up«. Among culture members a number of observations can be made. First it is likely that members assume that mother in question is that of the baby. Next they assume that the event described in the second sentence took place after that described in the first sentence; indeed, they will presume a causal relationship such that the mother picked up the baby because it cried, and with a mind to soothing it. Finally these sentences are recognized as a possible general description of a state of affairs without knowing which particular mother and baby is involved. (Sacks 1974: 226, according to Rapport and Overing 2005: 132-3)

Based on this, it is also typical for the researcher to pass the information through their own reference system and that is why the author, as much as the informants is responsible for the gossip sessions presented in this article.

Every aspect of human life is covered by gossiping and speculating. Besides being a widespread type of communication, the term gossiping or speculating itself is mainly used in a negative context in everyday life. The definition of gossip used in this article is value neutral because this type of communication has its negative as well as positive aspect and functions.

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