

# Psychophysiological Aspects of Aggression and Laughter in the Contemporary Culture of Russian Rap Battle

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## Abstract

Parody is a fundamental feature of irony, humor, carnival culture. Nevertheless, the tasks of irony and humor are fundamentally different. Irony disunites, while humor and carnival culture unite people at a psychophysiological level as a species. The article considers the culture of rap battle, where ironic and sarcastic texts prevail. The author examines modern rap battles for the potential of direct and pseudogame aggression in them. A parodic core, which is specific for carnival culture and modern rap battle, is considered. The author relies on the theoretical views of E. Fromm, A.G. Kozintsev, B.F. Porshnev, V.B. Shklovsky, M.M. Bakhtin, N. Tinbergen, B. Eikhenbaum, and Yu.N. Tynyanov.

**Keywords:** laughter, aggression, modern culture, rap battle, E. Fromm, A.G. Kozintsev, B.F. Porshnev, V.B. Shklovsky, M.M. Bakhtin, N. Tinbergen, B. Eikhenbaum, Yu.N. Tynyanov.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, Russian youth are interested in the art of declamation (poetry), rhyme. This is manifested in the growing popularity of rap culture, in particular – rap battles. The English word "rap" means "knock, blow". It is considered that a rap battle originated in America and is associated with "dozens" – street verbal battles of African Americans, which appeared in the beginning of the 20th century. Rap battles were created in order to avoid fights between gangs by means of a verbal duel (rhyme). In 1981, the first unplanned battle between two rap artists (Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee Starski) took place in New York at the World Christmas Rapper Convention, which influenced the development of this direction. At the moment when one of the rappers began to encourage the crowd to vote for him, another rapper began to improvise, addressing the second one with remarks "Wait, Bus ..., I do not want to be rude, but you'd better stop it". His response was followed by a sharp response of the second rapper.

A significant feature of the contemporary culture of Russian rap battle is that (unlike in the USA) it began to be formed in the form of imitation of foreign rap artists. Russian rap battles (as analogs of the Western ones) took place only at the beginning of the 21st century. The first was the "First MC Battle" held on December 5, 2001 at Hip-Hop.ru Forum. Online broadcasts brought popularity to many Russian rappers (A-Sid, Slava KPSS, etc.).

A similar form of verbal duel is found in early societies. It is related to the transition state. As for boys, this is the transition to the stage of growing up. Verbal confrontation of adult men was related to their entry into the "communitas" status. Victor Turner [1] believed that liminality and communitas were components of antistructure. Communitas is a sharp point of the community, raising it to a new level [2, 3]. The transition to the "communitas" status can be observed already in 2-3-year-old children, who try to quarrel with each other.

On the one hand, interest in rap battles can be explained by the degeneration of carnival culture into its aggressive forms (irony, satire), the desire of modern youth for adult gaming roles; mutation of a laughter element in media culture, which manifests itself in the transfer of the principles of carnival space into Internet communication [4] (Rakow, 1999); a virtual dialogue that modifies the content of privacy and publicity [5, 6]; instantaneous distribution of humor in media communications through duplication, comic copies, doubles, backups [7]; reduced vital experience obtained through virtual contact [8]. In addition, the properties of the media environment automate the very process of generating the ridiculous, unifying the attitude to this phenomenon in the younger generation [9].

On the other hand, it seems important to consider the battles as a combination of a game of order based on the

referential function of the language (irony) and a game of disorder (carnival). It is proposed to turn to the analysis of "punch", which goes back to the English definition of "punch" as a person combining the features of a pretender and a comic backup; it reduces direct aggression.

The author's attention is focused on the little-studied carnival-game aggression in rap battles, which reduces direct aggression. We consider such creative strategies for developing ultra-paradoxical behavior, like parody, interdiction, and poetic detachment.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research materials include the texts and video materials of Russian rap battles. The following criteria were developed for assessing pseudoaggression in them: spontaneity of laughter; carnival familiar speech; (laudatory abuse); body-game contact; dressing up (wearing masques); verbal and nonverbal humor; two-voiced word (tale, parody, stylization). Theoretical views of E. Fromm, A.G. Kozintsev, B.F. Porshnev, V.B. Shklovsky, M.M. Bakhtin, B.M. Eikhenbaum and Yu.N. Tynyanov were chosen to create a diagnostic tool.

Fromm's theory has been applied, in which there are two types of aggression: unmalicious and malicious. The first type represents an impulse to attack, characteristic of man and animals. Another type of aggression is peculiar only to man. It differs by its cruelty, not pursuing the goal of self-preservation [10].

The first type of aggression is gaming aggression, which initially has no negative motivation to inflict harm on another person, an animal, an inanimate object. It implies the manifestation of agility, speed, friendliness, achievement of professional skills. Therefore, it can be observed in various forms of art, in sports.

According to Kozintsev, carnivalization comes from the first type of aggression – peaceful archaic forms of a game of disorder. The researcher believes that the term "decarnivalization" means the process of turning comic aggression into a genuine one (second type). This is due to the loss of man's memory of his evolutionary past, the development of the brain structure, when speech replaces many nonspeech functions. Therefore, we can say that irony is a specifically human kind of direct aggression. This has been demonstrated by ethologists' research on humor as a specific human quality, in contrast to laughter and pleasure of a game, which are observed in nonhuman primates [11].

To assess the tactics of nonverbal humor and spontaneous laughter in rap battles, Tinbergen's theory of "shifted activity" was used. "Shifted activity" is a special behavioral strategy that arises from a conflict of motives (protection and escape), manifesting itself in inappropriate actions in a particular situation. "Shifted activity" in animals and people can be

expressed in various types of impulsive and compulsive behavior: feeding behavior (anorexia, bulimia, vomitomania); autogrooming and nest building; sexual behavior; sleep [12]. The same principle has been observed in the ironic texts of participants in rap battles, which can both inhibit carnival aggression and disinhibit it.

This principle is confirmed by theoretical views of Porshnev about the "inhibitory dominant", explaining the processes of mutual inhibition of the second signaling system and primary signal systems. The "inhibitory dominant" principle explains the emergence of ultraparadoxical activity (behavior, strategy, reflex, action) under conditions when the previous tactic of goal achievement is ineffective. Humor and irony can be manifestations of shifted activity and inhibitory dominant in rounds of rap battles that require participants to simultaneously attack and defend. The same principle of the inhibitory dominant explains spontaneous laughter of the audience and the rhyme-attacking rapper. Laughter simultaneously attacks (inflects) and defends (blocks-inhibits) the speech and thought of the opponent. The inadequate reflex (interdiction) not only provokes its involuntary imitation, slowing down the adequate reflex, but also enables to use one's own interdictive inhibition, influencing the inhibition of interdiction of another. Porshnev considers suggestion as the third stage of development of interdiction, at which the formation of speech occurs. Interdiction in rap battles is used for the purposes of defense and attack, since opponents' speech always consists of influence and opposition [13].

The thoughts of Kozintsev, Bakhtin, Eikhenbaum, Shklovsky, and Tynyanov about parody are of particular value in identifying humor in rap battles. Bakhtin considered a "two-voiced word" as a parodic word, stylization, stylized tale, dialogue [14]. Among all four elements that make up a "two-voiced word", Bakhtin distinguishes a common feature: in all cases, the word has a "twofold direction": to the subject of speech, as an ordinary word, and to another word, someone else's speech. In this case, "a conditional word is always a two-voiced word. Only that, which was once not conditional, serious, could become conditional" [14]. In his opinion, this is the difference of stylization as a conditional word from imitation, which "does not make the form conditional, for it takes the imitated seriously, makes it its own, directly assimilates someone else's word" [14]. Parody helps to weaken the style, which gradually turns into semi-stylization [14]. Parody differs from stylization in that the author, speaking in someone else's voice, "introduces into this word a semantic direction that is directly opposite to someone else's" [14]. Bakhtin considered dialogical relations to be nonlinguistic (the attitude toward one's own utterance, its separate parts and the word in it), which can limit or divide our authorship. Kozintsev believes that in humor the author splits into an invisible narrator and a character. In the contrary case, there is no humor [15]. Parody plays a great role in this; according to Tynyanov, although it is close to stylization, parody is different from it by mandatory discrepancy "of both planes, their displacement; comedy will be parody of tragedy (it does not matter whether through the emphasis on tragedy or through the appropriate substitution of the comic component), tragedy can be parody of comedy... stylization, comically motivated or stressed, becomes parody" [16]. The provisions of Eikhenbaum, who first raised the problem of a tale-teller, were used. According to this researcher, a tale "is of mimicry-declamatory nature, not narrative: not a narrator, but a performer, almost a comedian, hides behind the printed text" [17]. This feature of a tale is especially highly valued in the performance of the humorous text, which "has a double bottom, since besides the author (and the performer, when it comes to verbal humor) there is another invisible character – "unnamed teller". He destroys the semantics of the text; everything is planned for him [15].

## RESULTS

The following results have been obtained.

Some of the most bright rap artists (Oxxxymiron, Disaster, Sasha Skul, etc.) show a desire for parody.

Applying all of the above provisions to the behavior and texts of participants in national rap battles (Oxxxymiron; Slim; Ptakha (Zanuda); Gnoyny or Slava KPSS; Zamai; Max Korzh; L'One; Johnny Boy; Ernesto Zatkites; Dolphin, ST and others), it can be concluded that there is virtually no pure, direct aggression (irony) in their texts. In most cases, in rap battles the interdiction is observed; it raises spontaneous laughter in the opponent and weakens him.

Parody in rap battles serves as one of the main artistic devices, which hinders the direct aggression (irony) by its carnival, parodic double. An example is the parody of incest, in which the opponent's mother is mentioned; puns on sexual perversion expressed in phrases such as: "*Ty zhe vylez iz mamy pod moi diss na Babana*". Insulting the opponent's relatives is one of the characteristic features of rap battles' texts.

For example, such phrases as: "*While American soldiers shoot your cousins ... at the same time, your Arab side inclines your brothers to hate; Your son wears a muzzle, your brother loves Assad, your lover's name is Hassan and your father is your cousin ...*", used as rigid satire, irony, sarcasm, insult, deprived of humor, can not only be judged but also cause laughter and approval of the opponent and the public.

The cordial mood of the opponents can be sharply replaced by the aggressive text: "*We can use a rap battle for diplomatic purposes, what to say to these hooligans ... Look, there is no suitable quarter for our hostility. After all, I'm looking for a street to crush his teeth against concrete*". In the texts of the Russian rapper Oxxxymiron, there is logic of "praise" for the purpose of subsequent defeat of the opponent: "*This is the irony of fate. Isn't it, surprisingly? Before battling someone, I must first praise him to convince you that he could become a winner*". Direct aggressive intentions can be expressed in such rhymes as: "*I will bury you in Los Angeles...*"

A rap battle between Sasha Skul (a frontman of the band "Buchenwald Flava") and John Ray in 2014 most clearly confirms the provisions of humor, spontaneous laughter, hindering direct aggression. In this battle, one of the two participants, rapper Sasha Skul, began his performance with a story about himself, which was distinguished by its spontaneity, emphasized comic lowering of his image. He said that he had never participated in battles, that he would show folk tales, dancing, that he was an ordinary Russian guy, a skinhead, who worked at the factory. His performance and intonation convey the features of Ivan the Fool, who combines a hero and his parodic double. His opponent John Ray behaves aggressively. Unlike Sasha Skul, he does not use self-parody. Sasha Skul's tactics differ in using the principle of parody not so much of a particular person (John Ray) as of the image of a teenager. This largely confirms the provisions of Tynyanov about parody that does not always need special psychological prerequisites. The essence of parody is very often revealed in its mechanization as a technique, in the dialectical game [16]. This also confirms the essence of parody in rap battles as the instinctive disinhibition of the imitative reflex. Parody causes laughter precisely by its automatic nature and not always by the fact that someone ridicules or hates somebody.

Sasha Skul's performance is just like an indulgent father's lecture: "*Give me your mother's phone number ... We are closer in age to each other... Never shave the mustache and castle your fly. Adolescence... I can become your stepfather...*" Sasha Skul's replica: "*Give Oleg 1.5 thousand*", which suddenly sounds after the final rhyme, causes overall kind laughter of the audience and his opponent. In this rap battle, all the basic carnival speech

techniques (abusive texts on incest, childbirth of the opponent's mother, etc.).

Analyzing the nature of the text in rap battles of such artists as Oxxxymiron, Slava KPSS, Johnny Boy and others from the standpoint of Shklovsky, one can see the aspiration of all performers to using poetic rhyme based on the principle of parody, acting as the parallel and the opposite of some work of art, etc. [18]. This principle reveals itself in the rap battle between Oxxxymiron and Slava KPSS (Gnoyny): *"Not cloud in your pants," you're just a fashion, like a cloud-rap for a couple of seasons* (Oxxxymiron); *"You're the worst of all – creators of this tasteless taste. Where there is Yesenin's third-class remix or Aldous Huxley's first-class remix"* (Gnoyny).

Parody in rap battles is intellectual. It is not by chance that well-known quotations, which are pronounced in rap texts as being the thoughts of rappers, are often parodied. If they are used successfully, but an outsider does not know the history of rap battles and the biography of these artists, he/she may fail to understand their meaning, context and humor and simply misinterpret them. The most popular topics for parody in rap battles include a particular person, the people, the nationality of the opponent, the specificity of his language, etc.

#### DISCUSSION

Rap battles provoke game pseudoaggression, since praise-abuse in a rap battle unconsciously largely performs the function of carnival familiar speech that engenders spontaneous laughter, "in which mockery and jubilation, praise and abuse are inseparably merged" [14]. At the same time, it is impossible to exclude the possibility of manifestation of decarnivalization provoked by the culture of rap battles. This is due to the fact that the fundamental difference between carnival culture and laughter (as a culture blocker at the level of speech, thought) is that it (being of laughing nature) actively creates the second culture. ... Carnival is a structure that forces one to remember and make an effort to reproduce "carnival memory" ... in a sense, carnival culture is an unnatural occupation burdensome for a person [19]. In contact with it, a person can show direct aggression. Carnivalization can be related to hostility and aggression due to the fact that it disinhibits not only the imitative reflex associated with performance and friendliness, but also the defensive-offensive antigaming and antifriendly reflex expressed in speech (irony) and in physical aggression.

#### CONCLUSION

1. The desire of the youth to show carnival energy in rap battles can be explained by the invariability of the nature of laughter in the modern world as its function changes in the media environment.
2. Rap battle is a carnival area that is deformed by being reduced in the media environment in the form of humorous, ironic texts, photos, video information. Therefore, carnival laughter, arising during live contact at rap battles, cannot be imitated, unlike humor and irony, easily reproduced in the media environment.

3. Carnival nature in the texts of rap battles is manifested in the avoidance of direct aggression through parody and moments of shifted activity.
4. Humor as a game signal of pseudoaggression harmonizes the relations between participants of a rap battle before and after the rounds.

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