By the beginning of the 19th century, Russian table-talk, under the influence of English and French table-talk, emerged in Russian high society and made its way to circles of friends, gradually transforming into liberated conversation and relocating from the cultural periphery to its center (Lotman 1979). A similar situation occurred one and a half century later; in Brezhnev’s seventies, the generation that did not face Stalinist terror, but tasted Khrushchev’s Thaw, embarked on kitchen conversations, where political, social and cultural subjects arose and, concurrently, anecdote-jokes and table-talk flooded into Soviet popular culture. However, as a result of harsh censorship, while Pushkin collected his table-talks in Notes, and Vyazemsky brought them into The Diary, table-talk in the Soviet times existed mainly as a primary speech genre until the nineties. Dovlatov, who continued Gogol’s and Chekhov’s tradition of transforming anecdote into story, also revitalized table-talk as genre in Solo on Undervood, in 1980 while in the West. He embraced this speech genre with storytelling from the first person, as in The Zone or The Compromise and deceives his reader-listener who perceives the stories and novellas as the author-narrator’s biography or memoirs and the characters as real people.

In The Reserve, the narrator constantly interrupts the plot line—his life story—just as the narrator of a memoir would, and prompted by his associations, retells table-talks. The reader becomes not only a listener of the story but also a participant of a table-talk. At the same time, the narrator is a listener who overhears conversations to supply them in the proper place and moment. This paper explores The Reserve to illustrate Dovlatov’s writing technique and to show how table-talk as a speech genre functions in a literary environment.