

**The Concepts of “Verse”, “Metre”, and “Rhythm”
in Russian Versification Studies:
The “Russian Method” from Formalism to Structuralism
and Contemporary Approaches**

Igor Piľščikov [Pilshchikov]
(M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia
— Tallinn University, Estonia)

Pour citer cet article : Igor Piľščikov [Pilshchikov] « "The concepts of "verse", "meter", and "rhythm" in Russian versification studies. The "Russian method" from formalism to structuralism and contemporary approaches" », *Les enfants de Herbart, Des formalismes aux structuralismes en Europe centrale et orientale. Filiations, reniements, héritages*, ed. Xavier Galmiche, Formalisme esthétique en Europe centrale, formesth.com.

1. My approach to the problem of metre and rhythm is not only theoretical, but also practical: together with my colleagues I research the problems of automated rhythmic and morpho-syntactic analysis of poetic texts and, in particular, the problems of automated recognition of verse metres and rhythmic forms (see PIL’ŠČIKOV, STAROSTIN 2009; 2010; PILSHCHIKOV, STAROSTIN 2011). This is why I am interested in the issue of the interrelation between metre and rhythm. At the same time, this is a core problem in the study of Russian prosody. Arguably the discovery of the opposition between metre and rhythm marked the beginning of verse studies in Russia.

In his *Introduction to Metrics: A Theory of Verse* (1925) Viktor Žirmunskij wrote: “The main problem in the verse theory, of which all this book was conceived, is the opposition of rhythm and metre, as it was first clearly expressed, for Russian classical verse, in Andrej Belyj’s well-known works on iambic tetrametre (*Symbolism*, 1910)” (ŽIRMUNSKIJ 1925: 6; cf. TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1929: 53).¹ Žirmunskij was convinced that metre draws a borderline between what should be regarded as verse and what as prose; however, this is not true because there also exist such phenomena as metrical prose as well as *vers libre*, i.e. free, ametrical verse.

If indeed it was the presence of metre which enabled us to decide between what is verse and what is prose, then this would solve the problem of a constructive definition of verse, since every text containing metre would automatically be regarded as verse and any ametrical text would be regarded as prose (which we know is not the case). It should be noted at this point

¹ Here and henceforth, translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

that the descriptive definition of verse is a theoretical description of the difference between verse and prose.² Therefore, the opposition between *verse* and *prose* is more fundamental than the opposition of *metre* and *rhythm* and precedes it methodologically.

The Russian verse theory at its late formalist stage came up with the theoretical definition of verse, which is most clearly expressed in Boris Buxštab's formula of a "dual segmentation". As late as 1973, Buxštab (who was a *mladoformalist*, that is "young formalist", a member of the group of Jurij Tynjanov's and Boris Ejxenbaum's disciples) wrote: "Any text breaks up into subordinate syntactic segments; in the poetic text, however, this [...] is combined with the segmentation into lines of verse as well as verse entities which are larger or smaller than the line [...] the latter segmentation can either coincide with, or diverge from the former, thus creating innumerable possibilities of rhythmic-syntactic correlations" (BUXŠTAB 1973: 110–111).

Maksim Šapir thus commented on the problem: "[if we follow Buxštab's line of thought, then] the difference between verse and prose is the division into verses itself. [...] This definition of poetic discourse was formulated independently by Maksim Kenigsberg [1923], [Boris] Tomaševskij [1923] and [Jurij] Tynjanov [1924]. The shortcoming of their definition is not its seemingly tautological character, but its insufficiency: we do not know what is the peculiarity of the poetic line as compared with any other [kind of line]. Tomaševskij believed the *specificum* of verse was its state of being divided into comparable and commensurable segments" (ŠAPIR 1995: 49).

Mixail Gasparov, who recalibrated many formalist concepts in the structuralist period, endorsed Tomaševskij's idea. In his entry on "Stix" ("Verse") in the *Concise Literary Encyclopedia*, Gasparov formulated the two main characteristics of the verse lines: their "comparability" (*sopostavimost'*) and their "commensurability" (*soizmerimost'*):

STIX [VERSE] (from the Greek στίχος — row, line) is an artistic speech, [which is] phon[et]ically divided into relatively short segments (each of which is also called "S[tix]" [a verse-line]), [and] which are perceived as comparable and commensurable. The opposite notion is that of *prose* (see *Poetry and prose*). The prosaic speech is also divided into segments — *cola* [Sing. *colon*]; but, as compared to prose, the verse segmentation has two peculiarities: 1) in prose, text segmentation is determined only by

² We call a definition descriptive (or theoretical) when it identifies the object by enumeration of its properties or functions. A constructive (or practical) definition is an explicit description of its arrangement. Applied sciences transform descriptive definitions into constructive definitions, while

syntactic pauses, [while] in verse, the dividing pauses may be not coincident with syntactic pauses (*enjambement*); 2) in prose, segmentation by the dividing pauses is to a large extent arbitrary, [while] in verse, it is predeterminedly fixed (GASPAROV 1972a: 197; cf. 2001: 6; SKULAČEVA 2012: 45–46).

In the 1990s Šapir challenged this definition arguing the following: if we take, say, a free iambus and *vers libre* as examples, we shall see that the verse lines [i] are not *comparable* in quantitative terms (they may have from 1 to 12 and more syllables), and [ii] they are not *commensurable* in qualitative terms, that is they do not always use one and the same *measure* (in a free iambus, a *monosyllabic* line may be rhymed with a *monopodic* line and a *polypodic* line: it is hard to consider a *one-syllable* line as an iambic *foot* which should contain *two* syllables)³. Thus, according to Šapir, verse cannot be described in terms of *comparability of the commensurable*, but rather as the *equation of incommensurable*. Hence his own theoretical definition of verse:

Verse is the system of pervasive compulsory paradigmatic segmentations [...]. Verse segmentations are pervasive because they run through the entire work or fragment. Verse segmentations are compulsory because they are pre-ordained by the author's will which is objectively expressed and cannot be ignored by a recipient. Verse segmentations are paradigmatic: they form the rhythmic units belonging to the same level which are correlated with one another as variants of a single invariable (ŠAPIR 1999/2000: 138).

The last part of this definition was widely discussed, but this discussion is irrelevant for the context of the present paper. What matters for our purposes is that Šapir's *theoretical* definition of verse, as well as the one by Gasparov, is hard to convert into a *constructive* definition, as Šapir himself once pointed out (quoted in PILŠČIKOV, STAROSTIN 2009: 300). To build computers programs we use constructive definitions. It means that today we are still not capable of developing an algorithm which would enable us to distinguish between prose and verse in general.

Boris Tomaševskij, who was educated as an engineer and represented the “empiricist” wing of Opojaz (the Petersburg association of formalists) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle (the Moscow association of formalists), always used constructive categories in his thinking. In his *Russian Versification: Metrics* (1923) Tomaševskij writes: “It is impossible to give an exact

theoretical sciences transform constructive definitions into descriptive definitions (JAGLOM 1980: 13–14).

objective definition of verse, it is impossible to list the main properties which distinguish between verse and prose” (TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1923: 7).

A constructive definition of verse is unavailable, but we can constructively define versification systems and metres within each versification system. Therefore, the concept of “commensurability” introduced by Tomaševskij and Gasparov, enables us to define *metre*, rather than *verse*.

2. Let us now consider the opposition of metre and rhythm. The verse rhythm is distinct from the rhythm of the real speech: we are aware of different “expiratory power” of vowels in ictic and non-ictic positions (which was noted as early as 1922 by Roman Jakobson in his “Brjusov’s stixology” [JAKOBSON 1922: 229; RUDY 1976: 481]), we know that the so called “semi-stressed” words are pronounced differently in ictic and non-ictic positions (as was discussed by Jakobson, Tomaševskij, Žirmunskij and Gasparov). In other words, metre only emerges against the background of rhythm, and rhythm emerges against the background of metre.

In 1921 Žirmunskij maintained: “Rhythm is the *real alternation* of stresses in verse, [which emerges] as a result of interaction between the natural properties of language material and an ideal metrical intention” (ŽIRMUNSKIJ 1921: 98; 1925: 7). In 1925 he explained that “the verse rhythm is always a compromise form, which emerges as a result of the resistance of the material” to the metrical intention, or metric law (ŽIRMUNSKIJ 1925: 18). Tomaševskij objected that we should not speak of the resistance, but of the “arrangement of language material” (TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1929: 49).

The dilemma of metre and rhythm can be solved in a different way. As Maksim Kenigsberg wrote in 1923, “Verse in its essence is not a physical, but a semiotic phenomenon” (KENIGSBURG 1994: 163). Verse is a sign, and, in the same way, metre and rhythm are signs (this was the position of the “phenomenological” wing of the Moscow Linguistic Circle: in particular, Kenigsberg, Nikolaj Žinkin and Grigorij Vinokur). Tynjanov also gave eloquent examples of metre as a sign such as, for instance, incomplete or omitted lines (TYNJANOV 1924: 22 sq.; 1977: 60; cf. JU. LOTMAN 1970: 66).

³ In Gasparov’s definition, “COMMENSURABILITY, in verse studies, is a property of all poetic lines of the [poetical] work to be measured (in the reader’s consciousness) by one and the same conventional measure” (GASPAROV 1972b: 43).

Semiotically speaking, any sign is “a material formation which is discernible against its background” (ŽINKIN 1961: 159): metre is a sign against the background of rhythm; rhythm is a sign against the background of metre; they are both interrelated signs against the background of natural speech. This is the reason why the initial object of analysis for both a computer and a human analyzer is the rhythm of the natural speech. A rhythmic and metric model of verse can be thus based on automated accent-oriented morphological text analysis. This enables us to analyze poetic texts written in languages with variable stress, such as Russian (PIL’ŠČIKOV, STAROSTIN 2011: 133).

How is all this related to the processes of generation and reception of poetic speech? Let us look at how Tomaševskij envisaged this problem. His main idea was that the synthesis of verse proceeds from metre to rhythm, while the analysis proceeds from rhythm to metre. I quote:

Creating the design of a poem, the poet is determined by a metrical scheme, which he feels to be a kind of rhythmical-melodical contour, a framework, into which words are “inserted”.

During its realization in words, rhythmical impulse finds an expression in the actual rhythm of individual lines. [...]

The listener perceives the rhythm in the inverted order. First he is confronted with the actual verse-line rhythm. Then, under the impression of the reiteration of rhythmical configurations, due to his perception of a sequence of verse-lines, the listener grasps the rhythmical impulse [...]. At a still higher degree of abstraction from the rhythmical pattern he grasps the metrical scheme which he had uncovered by scanning (TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1923: 83)⁴.

Tomaševskij’s notion of *rhythmical impulse* is not a determinist, but a statistical type of norm, as Miroslav Červenka pointed out in his discussion of this concept (ČERVENKA 1984: 30). For the poet, the *rhythmical impulse* is the same as the *rhythmic inertia* for the recipient (as Žirmunskij called it), and the *rhythmic profile* for the scholar of verse (the term has been used ever since it first featured in Kiril Taranovsky’s and Mixail Gasparov’s seminal works)⁵.

From a theoretical point of view, however, the question is not that simple. What is objectively given, and what is subjectively constructed? Is rhythm given initially? Then metre is a post-factum construction. Or vice-versa, is metre a given entity and rhythm a mere construction?

⁴ Quoted in English in ČERVENKA 1984: 30. I have slightly modified the translation.

Let us consider the definitions of metre and rhythm proposed by the Russian theorists, starting from the prominent symbolist poet and verse theorist Andrej Belyj: “Under the rhythm of the poem we understand the symmetry of deviations from the metre” (BELYJ 1910: 396). The later scholars pointed out the interrelation between metre and rhythm. This interrelation may be conceived as a “descent” from metre to rhythm, as in Tomaševskij and Žirmunskij. In his 1923 treatise Tomaševskij wrote: “[...] metre is the principle of compatibility of verse lines”. “Rhythm is a real sound form, the actual arrangement of qualitative relations of pronunciation for each separate verse-line”. Metre is an “abstract scheme”, while rhythm is a concrete individual form, a “real form” (TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1923: 44, 66). Žirmunskij added: “[...] metre is a general law of alternation of strong and weak sounds, [while] rhythm embraces concrete particular cases of application of this law, the variations of the main metric scheme” (ŽIRMUNSKIJ 1925: 11). In Jurij Lotman’s structural poetics this thesis was later re-formulated in terms of linguistic and information theory oppositions (“language *vs* speech”, “system/grammar *vs* text”, “code *vs* message”) (JU. LOTMAN 1972: 46–59).

The same interrelation may be conceived as an “ascent” from rhythm to metre, as in the above quoted passage from Tomaševskij or in the verse studies of the great Russian mathematician Andrej Kolmogorov, who wrote: “Under *metre* I understand a regularity of rhythm which is distinct enough to arouse: a) the expectancy of its confirmation in further lines, b) a specific experience of ‘irregularity’ when it is interrupted” (KOLMOGOROV 1963: 64).

Mixail Lotman has recently introduced a useful distinction:

All approaches to metre can be divided into two main groups: I will call these respectively a priori and a posteriori. In accordance with the a priori approach metre precedes [...] poetical text. Metre is realized in a poem, the competent reader recognizes it, and the researcher describes it. [...] According to the a posteriori approach, metre does not precede text but is its immanent quality, the competent reader perceives it [...], the researcher makes it explicit (M. LOTMAN 2008: 32–33).

In the last analysis, the difference between the a-priori metrics and the a-posteriori metrics may be reduced to the problem of interrelation between metre and rhythm, Mixail Lotman argues. From the point of view of the a-priori approach, metre has a primary function, while rhythm is its realization; whereas for the a-posteriori approach, rhythm is the primary reality, while metre is a secondary formation. The researcher suggests to transfer this problem

⁵ For further discussion see LJAPIN, PILŠČIKOV 2012: 433–435. On Jakobson’s use of these terms see

from the methodological sphere to the ontological sphere and to interpret the difference described above not as two different *approaches* to metre, but as two drastically different *types* of versification metres. If we deal with a well-known structures which are unequivocally interpreted by both the author and the readers, Mixail Lotman calls such metres *explicit*. If the structure is new, and is not unequivocally recognized, such metres are *implicit*.

Usually the difference between explicit and implicit metre is reflected already in their names. In the first case we are dealing with nomination (iambus, hexameter), in the second case with description; for instance, the “metre of Russian fairy tales”, the “bylina verse”, even such a splendid name like the “verse metre of Songs of the Westerns Slavs”, that is, the metre Pushkin used in his cycle Songs of the Westerns Slavs (M. LOTMAN 2008: 33).

3. Maksim Šapir combined the a-priori and a-posteriori approaches. His conception of metre was developed in his article “Metrum et rhythmus sub specie semioticae”, where he proposed a revision of the linear hierarchy of metre and rhythm, that is the views of rhythm as a system of deviations from metre, or rhythm as a particular realization of the metric scheme. Šapir conceived of two processes which are opposite in direction to each other: “metrization” of rhythm and “rhythmization” of metre (ŠAPIR 1990; 2000).

For Andrej Belyj, Tomaševskij and Žirmunskij metre was law, while rhythm was tendency; for Šapir, both rhythm and metre are tendencies, and they are not straightforwardly deductive from each other. Rhythm is not a particular case of metre, because rhythm, being able to violate metre, can be autonomous from it. Metre, in its turn, is non-deductive from rhythm, because rhythmically identical lines can be differently interpreted in different metrical contexts or, to put it another way, the rhythmic forms of different metres can be isomorphic. In this case, we deal with metrical ambiguity (JAKOBSON 1922: 229; TOMAŠEVSKIJ 1929: 15 sq.; ŠENGEI 1960: 154–162).

If the entire poem consists of such metrically ambiguous lines, it would be a bimetrical text, as in the poem by the 19th-century Russian poet Aleksandr Poležaev, which was cited by Aleksandr Iljushin (ILJUŠIN 1988: 67): its metre may be perceived as the 2-foot trochee

— ∪ — (∪)

or the 1-foot anapaest

∪ ∪ — (∪).

These are two ways of “metrization” of the same rhythm. Other examples of “metrization” are the logaoedic verses, especially the so called “author’s logaoeds”, such as Osip Mandelštam’s “*Segódnja durnój dén’...*”, where a particular rhythmic pattern

U'UU''

is reiterated throughout the poem and thus becomes its metric scheme:

U — UU — —.

The opposite transformation may be called “rhythmization” of metre. For instance, in Joseph Brodsky’s “Strophes” of 1968, the metre of the initial line (“*Na proššán’e ni žvúka*”) is 2-foot anapaest:

UU ⊥ UU ⊥ U,

as is the metre of the entire poem:

UU — UU — (U).

However, the metre of a rhythmically identical and phonetically similar initial line of his “Strophes” of 1978 (“*Napodób’e stakána*”) is the 3-ictus dol’nik:

— U ⊥ UU ⊥ U,

because the entire poem is written using this metre:

(U) — U (U) — U (U) — (U).

Not only this line, but many other lines of Brodsky’s 3-ictus dol’nik are isomorphic to the 2-foot anapaest. It is interesting to note that the 1978 “Strophes” contain a whole stanza, whose *all* lines are isomorphic to the 2-foot anapaest. In Brodsky’s 1978 poem this is a *rhythmic quotation*, which however, refers to a *metrical* precedent (his own poem which was written 10 years earlier and which is referred to in the title and the initial line of the later poem).

Šapir’s “metrization of rhythm” and “rhythmization of metre” partly correspond to the less known concepts of *logaedizacija* [“logaoedization”] and *verlibrizacija* [“vers-libre-ization”] which were introduced by Vadim Rudnev (see RUDNEV 1982; 1986; 1997: 52–53, 148–150).⁶ Indeed, transformation of rhythm into metre is a transformation in the direction of the logaoed, while transformation of metre into rhythm is a transformation in the direction of the *vers libre*. In the Brodsky example, the dol’nik is a more *libre* metre than the anapaest because it tolerates a wider variation of inter-ictic intervals (cf. PIL’ŠČIKOV, STAROSTIN 2010: 404–405;

⁶ Vadim Rudnev understands these terms in a wider culturological sense; I prefer to remain in the realm of metrics.

SKULAČEVA 2012: 48). On the contrary, 100% of one and the same rhythmic form in an “iambic” poem will turn this iambus into the logaoedic or paeanic verse.

Thus, contemporary Russian verse theory proposes the theoretical representation of metre as “tendency” or “potentiality”. Since metre is never preconceived (at least from the reader’s point of view), then every poetic line is, *in potentia*, heterometric. In the context of the entire poem such metrical ambiguity may be either disambiguated (remaining, however, a factor of rhythm), or realized as a metric tendency (as in the so called “transitional metric forms”) or even the metric law (in genuine heterometric texts).

4. I would like to conclude with a few notes which should closer connect the problems of metre and rhythm to the question of psychological and anti-psychological models in literary studies.

Initially the formalist verse theory was based on a concept which was built according to the model of the stimulus-and-response psychology. As Boris Jarxo formulated it in his “Elements of Formal Analysis” and *Exact Methods in the Study of Literature* [*Metodologija točnogo literaturovedenija*], a text is artistic, if it is aesthetically efficient. The aesthetic efficiency of any element of the artistic work is determined by its quantitative or structural peculiarity. “Peculiar” means “unusual”: the peculiar is either unusually frequent, or unusually infrequent, or unusually arranged (JARXO 1927; 2006: 42, 70–71; GASPAROV 1969: 505; PIL’ŠČIKOV 2011: 91).⁸ Jarxo argued that, unlike the psychologist, the scholar of literature examines the psychological stimuli which are inherent in literary works, while the psychologist researches the recipient’s responses (JARXO 1927: 8).

However, when the formalist scholars of verse started to describe artistic phenomena as “less or more frequent” and use the stochastic and statistical approach, their methodological orientation changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, among the “non-exact” sciences biology was in the forefront regarding the application of variational statistics. Thus, biology replaced psychology as a methodological paragon and paradigm in Jarxo’s *Metodologija* which later gave rise to Mixail Gasparov’s wide-scale project of multi-aspect quantitative study of Russian and European verse (ŠAPIR 2007).

⁷ See P. RUDNEV 1972: 227.

⁸ An English-language overview of Jarxo’s research programme is found in MARGOLIN 1979.

In the recent years, several important studies have been published which are devoted to the formalists' use of psychological and biological terminology in poetics.⁹ The comparison of the disciplinary origins of terminology with the new functions that it acquires in the new terminological system is a promising research trend. On the other hand, the nomothetic development of poetics itself should also be taken into account because this development creates the “recipient structure” which accepts and transforms the impulses coming from outside.

In the history of knowledge, periods of nomothetic development, or “normal science” (as Thomas Kuhn calls it) are opposed to the “scientific revolutions” which generate new epistemological paradigms. The formalist breakthroughs of the 1910s and 1920s as well as the structuralist and semiotic breakthroughs of the 1960s were precisely such “revolutions”, i.e. the periods of grand conceptual shifts. New scientific revolutions often emerge from insights which remained under-developed during and after previous scientific revolutions — this is precisely what happened in the 1960s when the structuralists revamped formalist ideas.

The post-formalist epistemological paradigm may be regarded as a “progressive research programme” in Imre Lakatos's sense, with its valuable formalist “hard core”, which we may support with auxiliary theories. At the same time, the recalibration of our contemporary reception of formalism may well give rise to a new revolution in humanitarian knowledge. In particular, it may revitalize the use of formal and statistical methods in the study of literature, which proved effective in studies of verse structure, where the “Russian method” is now applied not only to Russian, but also to other national forms of European verse (GASPAROV 1987; 1996; TARLINSKAJA 1976; 1993; 2011; et al.).

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⁹ First and foremost, I have in mind the works of Ilona Svetlikova (SVETLIKOVA 2005) and Marina Akimova (AKIMOVA 2005).

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