Rhythmical Structure of Russian Iambic Tetrameter and Its Evolution

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Abstract

It has been considered for many years that the rhythm of Russian iambic tetrameter is formed under the influence of two tendencies: 1) stabilization of the first ictus after at least one unstressed syllable and 2) regressive accentual dissimilation, that is, that alternation of strong and weak ictuses in the direction from the end of a line towards its beginning (Taranovsky 1971). Meanwhile, the doubts expressed as early as 1973 by Miroslav Chervenka were recently confirmed. A number of studies have discovered the reality of linguistic factors (syntax as one of the main factors) that form the rhythmic structure of a verse text. We acquired statistical data for Russian longer poems of the middle and second part of the 19th century which have never been investigated before. These data seriously question the existing views regarding the logic of the development of Russian iambic tetrameter.

1 Introduction

It has been considered for many years that the rhythm of Russian iambic tetrameter is formed under the influence of two tendencies: 1) stabilization of the first ictus from the left within a line under the condition that it does not occupy the first syllable of a line; if it does the second ictus from the left undergoes stabilization; and 2) regressive accentual dissimilation, that is, the alternation of strong and weak ictuses in the direction from the end of a line towards its beginning (Taranovsky 1971). However, some scholars called the existence of these trends into question (Červenka 1973; Kholshhevnikov 1973; Gasparov 2003).

Taranovsky has studied a vast amount of Russian iambic tetrameter (Taranovsky 1953, 1971). But there was one period of Russian iambic tetrameter development which at that time he didn’t manage to cover in detail: it was the second half of the 19th century. At the same time data for this period, and especially concerning longer narrative poems of the second half of the 19th century in addition to shorter lyrics taken by Taranovsky, may be important for the whole picture of Russian iambus development. These data
will be provided in this article and they may help us to see the history of iambus in the second half of the 19th century differently than it was customary understood before.

2 Rhythmical structure and syntax

Let’s begin with an example. In 1975, James Bailey (Bailey 1975) analyzed the iambic tetrameter of Sluchevsky. Here is Bailey’s main conclusion:

[…] The stressing of Slučevsky’s narrative verse is exceptional for the middle of the nineteenth century because the second ictus has been weakened to 88.2% so that there is a near leveling of the first two ictuses.

The data presented in this article and a number of other articles by us (Liapin 2016) show that we are not dealing with an exception. One need only compare Bailey’s data on Sluchevsky with our calculations for narrative verse of the nineteenth century (Nekrasov, Maykov, Polonsky, Karolina Pavlova—see TAB. 1, 2, 3).

So if we take into account our data the situation is actually the opposite: the second ictus of Sluchevsky is even more intensively stressed than in the second half of 19th century in general. The highly stressed second ictus in Taranovsky’s data can be explained by the fact that in Taranovsky’s data for the 19th century the second part of the 19th century is poorly represented and longer narratives are almost fully absent from the calculations. And as it is shown by the data presented below narratives in the mid-19th century and in the second half of the 19th century differ rhythmically from lyrical poems.

Why the structure of narrative verse is markedly different from that of lyrics?

Let us compare the two examples – a narrative poem and a lyrical poem by K. Sluchevsky:

**Lyrical verse**

***

Нет, не от всех предубеждений
Я и поныне отрешён!
Но всё свободней сердца гений
От всех обвязок и пелён.

Бледнеет всякая условность,
Мельчает смысл в любой борьбе...
В душе велика готовность
Свободной быть самой в себе;

И в этой правде — не сладчавость,
Не праздный звук красивых слов,
А вольной мысли величавость
Под лязгом всех земных оков...

**Narrative verse**

(…)

В усадьбе шум и суматоха;
Такого в ней переполоха
Не помнят. От начала дня
Повсюду стук и беготня;
Уж сколько раз зашли поповна
И попаадья — взглянуть на дом:
Как будет сделан в нём приём?
Одна Мария хладнокровна,
По виду, правда, но своё
Исполнила. Она решила
Чтобы Царя в дому ея
Былое время окружило!

(…)

We see that sentences are less uniform in length and often have a more complex structure in non-stanzaic narrative verse (than in stanzaic lyrical verse); the boundaries of sentence often do not coincide with the boundaries of a line. In this case
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Ictus

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TAB. 1: Data by J. Bailey and K. Taranovsky (Bailey 1975) in comparison with new data for the 19th century

Forms of iambic tetrameter

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27.4 % 9.0 % 13.6 % 38.5 % – 9.5 % 2.2 %

TAB. 2: Detailed data on iambic tetrameter of the 19th century: Maykov (“Dva mira”, Part 1); Nekrasov (“Tishina”), “V. G. Belinsky”; Polonsky (“Svezhee predanye”, Chapters 1 and 6); Karolina Pavlova (“Kadril”); Maykov (“Dva mira”, Part 2)

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TAB. 3: Stressed ictuses (%): narrative poems of the 19th century; Sluchevsky—narrative poems; Sluchevsky—“Nyanya”; Nekrasov—“Tishina”; Nekrasov—“V. G. Belinsky”; Karolina Pavlova—“Kadril”

the third\textsuperscript{1} form of iambic tetrameter (with stress omitted at the second ictus) appears much more often (Liapin 2016), which, of course, lowers the number of stresses at the second ictus.

\textsuperscript{1} Here is the list of rhythmical forms as they are normally viewed in the Russian tradition. The number of a rhythmical form is determined by 1) whether stress/stresses are omitted in a line, and how many are omitted; 2) at which ictuses they are omitted. Thus a fully stressed line is the first rhythmical form, a line with a stress omitted at the first ictus is the second form, a line with a stress omitted at the second ictus is a third form and so on:

\[ u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad i \quad u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad v \]
\[ u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad ii \quad u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad vi \]
\[ u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad iii \quad u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad vii \]
\[ u \sim u \sim u \sim (u) \quad iv \]
So, we think that there is a correlation between the increasing frequency of sentence borders within a line (often followed by enjambements) and the increasing frequency of the third form and, accordingly, the lowering number of stresses at the second foot. It may also be accompanied by an increasing frequency of syntactic pauses within a verse line (often marked with punctuation marks).

Here is a typical example. We will compare two poems by N.A. Nekrasov written in iambic tetrameter in the 50s of the 19th century: “Unfortunates” and “V.G. Belinsky”. As S.A. Matyash (Matyash 2017) showed, these poems differ significantly in the use of enjambement: “Unfortunates”—8.5%, “V.G. Belinsky”—12.9%. The frequency of the third form is in direct proportion to the frequency of enjambement: “Unfortunates”—6.9%, “V.G. Belinsky”—12.9%. FIG. 1 gives the corresponding stress profile. If we leave out the lines which contain internal punctuation marks, then the stress profiles of both poems will almost coincide with each other (FIG. 2).

The same effect is observed in the speech model of Russian iambic tetrameter. By a speech model in the Russian tradition we mean segments of prosaic texts accidentally corresponding with iambic tetrameter. As the material we took I. Goncharov’s prose (“Oblomov’s Dream”). If we include in the statistics all the segments of the text which correspond with iambic tetrameter, we get the stress profile of a speech model of iambic tetrameter of the period given in FIG. 3.

Let’s now compare stress profiles for models with and without punctuation marks within “lines” (FIG. 4). The resulting picture is close to real verse. Here are the first ten model lines (on the left—containing punctuation marks, on the right—without).

| Где мы? В какой благословенный уголок          | благословенный уголок          |
| там моря, нет высоких гор                   | Оно наводит только грусть      |
| один и тот же стон, одни                     | так незаметно исчезает         |
| как осужденные, уныло                         | и тяжело ему смотреть          |
| там, кажется, напротив, ближе III            | и держат в страхе и тоске     |

3 Conclusion

The conclusion may be as follows. Investigating stress profiles only does not provide sufficient information for the description of the structure and evolution of verse rhythm. It is also important to use information on syntax, punctuation and, where possible, even phonetic characteristics (e.g. pauses) responsible for rhythmical differences between periods and between different types of verse (e.g. lyrics vs. narratives). Doubtlessly, in the future our analysis should be continued and improved by using more advanced linguistic and statistical methods.
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FIG. 1: Stress profile for all verse lines

FIG. 2: Data of FIG.1 after exclusion of lines where punctuation marks are within a line

FIG. 3: A profile of a speech model of iambic tetrameter (rhythm of prosaic segments accidentally corresponding with iambic tetrameter)

FIG. 4: Two types of a speech model – 1) all prosaic segments in Goncharov corresponding with iambic tetrameter and 2) only those segments which have got no punctuation marks within a segment
References


