Rhythmically Ambiguous Words or Rhythmically Ambiguous Lines? In Search of New Approaches to an Analysis of the Rhythmical Varieties of Syllabic-Accentual Meters

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Abstract

The statistical analysis of the rhythm of Russian syllabic-accentual verse confronts a problem: how to accentuate words whose natural-language stress is weaker than that of fully-stressed words. Zhirmunsky called such words “ambiguous” and formulated a rule: they should be considered stressed in “strong” (ictic) positions and unstressed in “weak” (non-ictic) positions. Gasparov, who accepted and elaborated on Zhirmunsky's rule, pointed out that “this difference in the quality of stress in strong positions [...] has a significant impact on the rhythm of verse, especially that of ternary meters.” The main point of the present paper is that this ambiguity equally impacts Russian binary meters. In the case of iambic tetramerter, for example, fully-stressed lines that contain rhythmically ambiguous words are often isomorphic with the predominating rhythmical form. In the present paper, this phenomenon is explored in connection with Jakobson's hypothesis that rhythmically ambiguous words gravitate toward “weak” (i.e. less frequently stressed) ictuses. Although Jakobson's view of accentual ambiguity was different from Zhirmunsky's, and Jakobson's calculation was, in fact, methodologically inaccurate, a cross-pollination of their approaches may prove fruitful.
1 The problem

The statistical analysis of the rhythm of Russian syllabic-accentual verse confronts a specific problem: how to accentuate words whose natural-language stress is weaker than that of fully-stressed words. This group includes monosyllabic pronouns, monosyllabic verbal copulas, disyllabic possessive pronouns in the post-nominal position, disyllabic prepositions, and the like.

Viktor Zhirmunsky called these words “metrically ambiguous” (“metričeski dvojstvennye”) and formulated a rule: they should be considered stressed in “strong” (ictic) positions and unstressed in “weak” (non-ictic) positions (Žirmunskij 1925: 95–120 §§ 17–19; English translation: Žirmunskij 1966: 93–113). In other words, their rhythmical interpretation depends on the metrical scheme. It would therefore be more reasonable to describe such words as “rhythmically ambiguous” rather than “metrically ambiguous,” because they never alter or violate the metrical interpretation of a line but indeed affect its rhythmical interpretation.

Mikhail L. Gasparov, who accepted and elaborated on Zhirmunsky’s rule, issued an important caveat: he pointed out that “schematic stresses may have different strengths depending on whether they are represented by an unconditionally stressed word or an accentually ambiguous word. This difference in the quality of stress in strong positions has not yet been studied by verse theorists, though it has a significant impact on the rhythm of verse, especially that of ternary meters” (Gasparov 1974: 148–149; translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise noted).

The main point of the present paper is that this ambiguity equally affects Russian binary meters, and therefore is all the more deserving of examination. To demonstrate this claim, I will target the best studied Russian meter, iambic tetrameter. In the rhythmical compositions of many poems, the fully-stressed lines (Form I), which contain rhythmically ambiguous words, often tend to be isomorphic with the predominating rhythmical form. To put it simply, if we mark the rhythmically ambiguous words on ictic positions as unstressed, the resulting rhythmical forms could theoretically coincide with any of the other seven rhythmical forms of iambic tetrameter. In practice, however, rhythmically ambiguous lines often coincide with the form that predominates in the poem. In particular, this applies to poems with a high level of “rhythmical monotony,” i.e. the poems (or fragments thereof) in which one or two forms constitute extensive homogeneous groups (see Beglov 1996).

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1 It is generally accepted to use the form numbers proposed by Georgii Shengeli (see Šengeli 1923: 139–141). The unstressed ictuses are underlined here and in all later examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>xXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>xxxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>xXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>xXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>xXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>xxxXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>xXxXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>xxxXxXxXxXxX(x)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Examples

2.1 Konstantin Batiushkov’s “Moj Genij”

Batiushkov’s four-foot-iiambic poems of 1815–17 have a two-mode rhythm: Forms I and IV add up to almost 87% (57.5% of Form IV and 29% of Form I; see Taranovski 1953: TAB. II; Dobritsyn 2016: 42–43). A typical example is Batiushkov’s “Moj Genij” (1815), where Forms I and IV are used throughout the poem, while Form II in the concluding line serves as a kind of “rhythmic italics” (“ritmičeskij kursiv”). However, out of six fully-stressed lines two are ambiguous, and both are isomorphic with Form IV (see FIG. 1). In Form IV, the third ictic stress is skipped. Correspondingly, in the ambiguous lines, the rhythmically ambiguous words fall on the third ictus: O pámjat’šérdca, ty sil’néj (line 1); Xranítel’ Génij moj — ljubóvju (line 13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O pámjat’ šérdca! mých silynéj</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rassúdka pámjatí pečálnoi,</td>
<td>I (IV)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I i často sládst’ svoéj</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menj v strane plenniésť dálnej.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye pómnju góló sýlých słóv.</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye pómnju óchi gudúbé,</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye pómnju lókony zlaté</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraёнno vyóðshad vlassóv.</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moéj pasťúshki nepravéénnoj</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye pómnju véj nařad prostój,</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I obraz miloj, nezabvéénnoj,</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Povsódu stránstvuet so mnój.</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xranítel’ Géniy moj — ljubóvju</td>
<td>I (IV)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V utéhó dáň razlýkte ón:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zasný l’y? prinýknjet k izgolóvéju</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I usładít pečálnoj són.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIG. 1: The rhythmical composition of Batiushkov’s “Moj Genij”

2.2 Joseph Brodsky’s “Soznan’e, kak šestoj urok...”

“Brodsky is the most monotonous poet in Russian” (Beglov 1996: 124). A typical example is his 24-line poem “Soznan’e, kak šestoj urok...” (1960s), in which 75% of the lines belong to Form III (Beglov 1996: 113). The rest (25%, i.e. six lines) consists of two lines corresponding to Forms I, three to Form IV and one to Form II. The Form II line and two Form IV lines are found in the concluding quatrain, whereas both fully-stressed lines are isomorphic to Form III (see FIG. 2). In Form III, the second ictic stress is
skipped. Correspondingly, in the ambiguous lines, the rhythmically ambiguous words fall on the second ictus: v prostránstve meždu dvúx desníc (line 11); zovět ego, kak púť nazád (line 19).

Сознанье, как шестой урок,
выводит из казённых стен
ребёнка на ночной порог.
Он тащится во тьму затем,
чтоб, тутам показав перстом
на тонущий в снегу погор,
себя здесь осенить крестом
у церкви в человечий рост.
Скопление мертвцев и птиц.
Но жизни остаётся мог
в пространстве между двох десниц
и в стороны от них. От них.
Однако же, стремясь вперед,
так тяжек напряжённый взор,
так сердце сдавлен, что рот
не пробует вдохнуть простор.
И только за спиною сад
покинуть неизвестный край
зовет ego, как путь назад,
знамёный, как собачий лай.
Да в тучах из холодных дыр
лунная старается блеснуть,
чтоб подсказать, что в новый мир
забор указывает путь.

III — III — III — III
III — III — III — III
III — III — I(III) — III
III — III — IV — III
III — III — I(III) — III
III — IV — II — IV

FIG. 2: The rhythmical composition of Brodsky's “Soznan'e, kak šestoj urok...”

3 Jakobson's approach

The phenomenon discussed above may be considered in connection with Roman Jakobson's hypothesis that monosyllabic words gravitate toward “weak” ictuses (Jakobson 1973). The weakest, i.e. the least frequently stressed ictus in the Russian iambic tetrameter of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the third (penultimate) one. Jakobson attempted to explain this with reference to the non-phonological nature of stress in the monosyllables (Rudy 1976: 493–495). Although Jakobson's view

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of accentual ambiguity was different from Zhirmunsky's, a cross-pollination of their approaches may prove fruitful.

First and foremost, it has been demonstrated that Jakobson's calculations were methodologically inaccurate and monosyllables, either stressed or unstressed, are not most frequent on the weak ictuses (Gasparov–Skulacheva 2003: 38–39; Golovastikov 2011: 43–47). However, Jakobson's insight may nevertheless be correct if we suppose that the words that gravitate toward the weak ictuses are not necessarily monosyllabic, but rhythmically ambiguous, and they can be either mono- or disyllabic.

The list of rhythmically ambiguous disyllabic words includes, for example, the prepositions sredi, protiv, mezhdú etc., the personal/possessive pronouns ego and eë, the possessive pronouns moja, tvojú, svoej etc. (especially if they are used as enclitics, i.e. in the post-nominal position), and others. Their special accentual status was already emphasized by Viktor Zhirmunsky, Boris Tomashhevsky, Kiril Taranovsky and Roman Jakobson. In particular, these words may generate the forbidden trochaic “trans-accentuation” (or “accentual reversal”) of an iambic foot (Jakobson 1979a: 168; 1979b: 583–584).

Tomashevsky noticed that the only example of such trans-accentuation in Pushkin's iambics involves the personal pronoun ego: Ja predlagáju výpit' v egó pámjat' (Tomaševskij 1923a: 55). Pushkin treats the disyllabic personal pronoun ego “as if” it is unstressed—or, in fact, he uses it as rhythmically ambiguous. If Pushkin had considered it completely unstressed, there would have been many examples of this kind in his poetry, rather than only one (Šapir 2005: 50; English translation: Šapir 2019: 125).

Taranovsky showed that the more numerous trans-accentuations in Radishchev and some other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets are of the same nature. They involve the pronouns egó, svojú, tvoím and the like: Ispólni sérdce tvóím žárom, etc. (Taranovski 1953: 19). Such examples are especially frequent in Radishchev. His renowned ode “Vol’nost’” (1780s) features eight lines (1.5%), in which several parts of speech are trans-accentuated: the possessive pronouns tvoím, tvóé and svoí, the pronouns mnóju, za tó and sebé, and even the adverb vsegdá, which is, moreover, trans-accentuated twice (Šapir 2005: 50; English translation: Šapir 2019: 125). However, the fact that all of Radishchev's trans-accentuations are of the same kind suggests that these words are rhythmically ambiguous—he did not allow himself to “trans-accentuate” fully-stressed words. Characteristically, they fall on the penultimate (third) ictus—the “weakest” in Russian iambic tetrameter (at least in the poetry of that time).

Compare Brodsky's rhythmically ambiguous disyllabic words on the weak ictus: v prostránstve meždu dvúx desníc; zovét ego, kak pút’ nazád. These lines can be recited as either Form I or III. Although no trans-accentuation is observed here, the second ictus is “weak,” because Form III, in which the second ictic stress is skipped, predomi-

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2 It is much less common in Russian verse than, say, in English poetry (Tarlinskaja 1987).
4 Rhythmical impulse

The presence of rhythmically ambiguous lines is one of the manifestations of what Russian verse theorists of the 1920s referred to as “rhythmical impulse” (“ритми́ческий импу́лс”). Tomashevsky and Zhirmunsky thus described it in their treatises on Russian versification:

“Creating the design of a poem, the poet adopts a metrical scheme, which he feels to be a kind of rhythmical-melodical contour, a framework, into which words are ‘inserted.’ As it is realized in words, the rhythmical impulse finds expression in the actual rhythm of individual lines” (Tomaševskij 1923b: 83).

“The listener perceives the rhythm in inverse 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 may be uncovered by scanning” (Tomaševskij 1923b: 83).

“Only the entire poem exhibits that inertia of the rhythm, that general rhythmical impulse, those regularities of rhythmic movement, which we call meter”. “The presence of a metrical scheme in verse is perceived by the reader as the inertia of rhythm [...]. From the point of view of the author or the performer of the poem this metrical scheme or law can be described as a sort of impulse dominating the given linguistic material. In more abstract terminology we speak of a metrical design [zadanie] or a metrical law [zakon]” (Žirmunskij 1925: 67, 71; translation quoted from Žirmunskij 1966: 67, 71; author’s emphasis).

The concept of rhythmical impulse describes a stochastic, not deterministic, norm (Červenka 1984: 30). Scholars of Russian verse have defined this phenomenon in statistical terms: as a rhythmic tendency in the works of Taranovsky and as an “image of the meter” (“образ метра”) in the works of Andrei Kolmogorov (see Gasparov 2015: 12; Pilshchikov 2017: 16–17). Taranovsky’s stressing profile (as a particular case of a rhythmic tendency) and Gasparov’s rhythmic profile of the meter are also statistical characteristics, but they are not identical to the statistics of rhythmical forms and do not always reflect the differences between individual types (or, to use Kolmogorov’s definition, “images”) of the meter (see Dobritsyn 2016: 34–38).

The statistics of rhythmical forms may be complemented with an analysis of the ambiguous forms, better reflecting the rhythmical impulse of the poem. Batiushkov’s iambic tetrameter has a two-mode rhythm (with predominating Forms IV and I), but a single rhythmical impulse, which makes both modes isomorphic. Batiushkov’s Form I sounds different from Brodsky’s because they are governed by different rhythmical impulses.
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References


