

Rhythm and Syntax in Aleksandr Sumarokov's Odes

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Abstract

The paper studies accentual rhythm and grammatical structures in the lines of iambic tetrameter in odic stanzas of Aleksandr Sumarokov—one of the most prolific and influential 18th century Russian poets and theorists of verse. The research described in the paper is based on the concept of the Russian iambic tetrameter as a stereotype, a cliché, or a formula. This concept was introduced in the 1920s by Ossip Brik and later developed by Mikhail Gasparov in relation to individual lines of the meter. The results obtained in the research demonstrate that in Sumarokov's odes, not only do the individual lines of iambic tetrameter become formulaic, but so does, to a certain extent, the whole odic decaetich. Formulaic lines tend to occur in certain positions in stanzas. Moreover, they tend to accommodate the key images and ideas of Sumarokov's solemn odes—the absolutist idea of state power and greatness of the monarch.

1 Introduction

The Russian odic stanza, particularly its traditional version—written in iambic tetrameter, with the sequence of 10 lines rhyming AbAbCCdEEd—has been explored quite extensively in Russian verse studies. Its composition in terms of accentual rhythm has been described in great detail based on extensive material (Taranovsky 2000; Gasparov 2012). However, the correlation between accentual rhythm and grammar in this stanza has been explored less profoundly. Certain aspects of the issue were considered by M. Shapir (2000) and I. Lilly (2004). The former studied the correlation between the average stress load in verse and the strength of syntactic links between lines in M. Lomonosov's odes. I. Lilly examined some very interesting trends in nouns and verbs located in the final position in lines, i.e. those that constitute rhymes.

This paper considers rhythmical and syntactic stereotypes in the odes of Aleksandr Sumarokov—those written in the traditional odic stanza. Sumarokov was chosen as one of the most prolific 18th century Russian odists and, at the same time, an outstanding theorist of verse, poetic language, and style.

The research was based on Sumarokov's odes included in his selected works published in the series *Biblioteka poeta* (Sumarokov 1957) in 1957 and on Parts 1 and 2 of his Complete works from 1787 (Sumarokov 1787a,b). Altogether, these account for 32 odes, or 302 stanzas (i.e. 3020 lines).

2 Method

In order to ensure wider comparability of the results, the description of grammar was based on typology introduced by M. Gasparov and T. Skulacheva (2004). The main groups of words, according to this typology, include the following:

- A. nouns and pronouns in the nominative case
- B. nouns and pronouns in the accusative case
- C. adjectives and participles in the nominative case
- D. adjectives and participles in the accusative case
- E. short adjectives and participles as predicates
- F. finite verb forms
- G. adverbial participles and infinitives
- H. adverbs
- I. conjunctions

The capital letters marking this list are also used subsequently in this paper for the schemes that describe word order in lines; zero (0) signifies an unstressed ictus, i.e. no content word on the ictus.

In the material considered here, the other parts of speech are relatively rare and do not form any rhythmical-grammatical stereotypes.

The typology used for syntactic links is also based on that introduced by M. Gasparov and T. Skulacheva (2004: 120, 182, 154), for the same reasons of comparability. The links are described as follows:

- (1) the strongest links, e.g. between proposition and noun, or between parts of a predicate
- (2) attributive (coordinated attribute)
- (3) objective (direct object)
- (4) objective (indirect object)
- (5) adverbial
- (6) predicative
- (7) between homogeneous elements
- (8) with participial clauses etc.
- (9) weaker links (e.g. between parts of compound sentences)
- (10) no link

The numbers on this list appear in schemes to mark the types and order of syntactic links in lines.

In addition, for various rhythmical and grammatical stereotypes that were detected, the terms introduced by M. Gasparov (Gasparov and Skulacheva 2004: 224–225) have been used. These include, in particular, rhythmical and syntactic formulas and clichés. According to Gasparov, clichés are structures where the same parts of speech are placed in the same order, with the same types of links between them. Formulas are clichés that, in addition to the above, also include at least one content word that occurs in several lines, in the same position. Cases when pronouns are repeated are not considered here, neither are repetitions of whole lines, without any variations.

3 Results and discussion

The data show that, in Sumarokov's odic stanza, clichés are distributed unevenly among the 10 lines (see TAB. 1). They are the least frequent in the final line, and most frequent in lines 6 and 8—those especially prone to accommodating rhythmical form IV of the iambic tetrameter. It is striking that the lines, which are more and less likely to include clichés alternate in the same manner as the lines with a heavier and lighter stress load, as described by K. Taranovsky (2000). Lines with feminine ending, where the 3rd ictus is more likely to be unstressed, are more prone to forming clichés, while the lines with masculine ending, marking the borders of stanzas, half-stanzas, or strophoids,¹ more often bear an accent on the 3rd ictus, and are more diverse in terms of their rhythm and grammar.

3.1 Preferred clichés

In Sumarokov's odic stanzas, clichés are found in 1,726 lines. Not surprisingly, some clichés are notably more productive, i.e. occur more frequently, than the others, and only 29 of them appear in 10 or more instances. Altogether, these account for 14.8 per cent of all the lines. The three most productive clichés potentially make simple sentences—they include a subject, a predicate, and a subordinate element (see TAB. 2).

The most frequent clichés also tend to be based on structures with notably “sublime” syntax.² Out of the 29 frequent clichés, nine include verbs as predicates and nouns as direct objects, where the noun tends to precede the verb—a manifestly bookish word order (see TAB. 3).

1 The shortest symmetrical periods of two or more lines within stanzas (Lotman-Shakhverdov 1979: 147).

2 In this paper, any comments on sublime or neutral word order in regard to the Russian 18th century are based on observations by I. Kovtunova (1969: 110–111).

Lines in stanza	Rhythmical forms of I4						Lines with clichés	
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	number	%
1	39	6	36	84	5	6	176	58.3
2	30	4	43	74	--	9	160	53.0
3	32	3	30	91	6	12	174	57.6
4	23	8	41	82	--	14	168	55.6
5	39	3	34	94	8	4	182	60.3
6	23	10	40	103	2	10	188	62.3
7	32	4	39	74	1	13	163	54.0
8	40	2	27	103	6	9	187	61.9
9	40	5	38	86	1	7	177	58.6
10	27	8	32	75	1	8	151	50.0
Total	325	53	360	866	30	92	1726	100

TAB. 1: Clichés, rhythmical forms of iambic tetrameter, and lines in Sumarokov's odic stanza

	Rhythmical form of I4	Parts of speech	Links	Examples	Occurrences
1	IV	A—B—0—F	(6) + (5)	И ветры с запада летят	28
2	IV	C—A—0—F	(2) + (6)	Злосердый рок окаменел	26
3	IV	A—B—0—F	(6) + (3)	Нептун державу покидает	25

TAB. 2: The most frequent clichés in Sumarokov's odic stanza

Forms of I4	Parts of speech	Links	Examples	Occurrences
IV	A—B—0—F	(6) + (3)	Нептун державу покидает	25
IV	D—B—0—F	(2) + (3)	И грозный рок остановила	21
IV	B—D—0—F	(2) + (3)	Пучину бурну возмутим	18
IV	B—A—0—F	(3) + (6)	Как воздух молния сечет	15
V	0—B—0—F	(3)	И тишину установила	15
IV	B—B—0—F	(3) + (4)	Неву покоем осеняет	13
IV	B—B—0—F	(4) + (3)	Пегасу лавры соплетая	10

TAB. 3: Sublime style in frequent clichés

Nevertheless, many clichés are based on stylistically neutral word order. Dislocation of epithet, being a very sublime and frequent device in Sumarokov's poetry (Kovtunova 1969: 133), forms only one productive cliché.

The inclination to vary structures, where lines are potentially equal to simple sentences, with the prevalence of stylistically neutral word order, demonstrates the quest for clarity and temperance, so often noted in Sumarokov's oeuvre.³

3 A clarity that, however, often turns out to be illusory. For more details, see, e.g., Alekseeva 2005: 243, 246.

3.2 Formulas

In the odes considered here, the more rigid stereotypes, referred to as formulas, occur in 324 lines, accounting for 10.7 per cent of the total amount of lines. This means that, on the average, each stanza includes one formulaic line.

It should be noted that formulas do not tend to emerge in the most frequent clichés. On the contrary, clichés that occur only twice may make very notable formulas.

Like clichés, formulas may emerge in syntactically simple or complicated lines alike. In the examples below, formulas 1 and 2 are very simple, with only one strong syntactic link, while formulas 3 and 4 are quite sophisticated, with multiple links and inversions:

Formula 1: C—0—0—A, (2)

Великая Императрица
Великая Елисавет
Великая Елисавета!
Великая Екатерина

Formula 2: C—0—0—A, (2)

И мудрая Екатерина
Премудрая Екатерина
Великая Екатерина

Formula 3: A—B—D—B, (10) + (4) + (2)

Как ток Египту Нильских вод
Брега с Египтом жарка юга

Formula 4: D—0—F—B, (2) + (5)

Претяжкою ступил ногою
И бурными попри ногами⁴

In some cases, the formulaic nature of verse is additionally supported by semantic parallels that occur between different words. E.g., in the following formula, the nouns ‘создатель’ (= creator), ‘обладатель’ (= possessor), and ‘повелитель’ (= lord) may be considered as contextual synonyms. Along with the repeated noun ‘вселенная’ / ‘вселенной’ (= universe, in the accusative case), and the repeated pronoun ‘всей’ / ‘вся’ (= all of the, the whole), these words make the formula very obvious.

D—B—0—A, (2) + (4)

Вся вселенная создатель
Я всей вселенной обладатель
Вся вселенной повелитель

This example is quite typical.

4 Italics emphasize the repeated words in formulaic lines.

3.3 Formulas and ideology

Not surprisingly, most of the odes considered here are based on images and ideas that represent state power, the greatness of the monarchy etc.—which is implied in the genre of solemn ode. Interestingly, approximately every second formulaic line represents absolutist ideology through a rather limited set of images. At the lexical level, those images are represented by sets of certain words that are repeated again and again. Such words include those that signify:

- a. attributes of royal power, e.g. throne, crown etc. (*трон, престол, корона*)
- b. names of the great ancient states, e.g. Egypt, Babel, Rome (*Египет, Вавилон, Рим*)
- c. titles of rulers, e.g. monarch, sultan, tsarina (*монарх, султан, царица*)
- d. words meaning ‘country’ (*страна, держава*)
- e. names of the great ancient rulers, e.g. Мамай, David (*Мамай, Давыд*), or Russian monarchs, e.g. Peter the Great, Elizabeth, Catherine the Great (*Петр, Елисавета, Екатерина*)
- f. ethnonyms or adjectives meaning ‘Russian’ (*Россы, Российский, Росский*)
- g. the waters of the Baltic sea or the Neva river, as metonymic reference to Saint Petersburg as the capital of the Russian Empire.

Thus, in Sumarokov’s odes, formulaic lines are very often key in terms of ideology.

3.4 Odic decastich as a stereotype

While words with a specific rhythmical and grammatical structure tend to occupy certain positions in lines (Brik 1927; Tomashevsky 1929: 127; Gasparov 1986; Gasparov–Skulacheva 2004: 62–90, 146–156, 202–225), lines with particular structures, in their turn, tend to be attracted to certain positions in the stanza. In Sumarokov’s odes, 24 occasions were detected where lines that represent the same rhythmical and grammatical formula were similarly located in the stanza. E.g., the following formula occurs in three lines, all of them being #9 in the stanza (in italics):

F—A—F—A, (6) + (9)+ (6)

Во уготованны чертоги,
Твоя Екатерина ждет:
Цветами устланны дороги,
Престол порфирию одет:
Вокруг стояция престола,
Младенцы обоюдна пола,
Тебе сплетают похвалы:
*Ликуют Росския народы,
Шумят леса и плещут воды,
Играют Невския валы.*

(Sumarokov 1787b: 79–80)

Икар высокомерный тает,
 Низвержен гордый Фаеонт:
 Екатерине соплетает,
 Хвалу весь юг и Гелеспонт.
 Турецкий флот горит, дымится
 Трепещет море, небо тмится,
 Земля колеблется, дрожит,
 Врагам во страхе нет отрады,
Шумят леса, валяются грады,
 К Дунаю вспять Визир бежит.

(Sumarokov 1787b: 116)

Великодушие имея,
 Страдающа спасти от мук,
 Муж древний восприял Борей,
 В объятие дрожащих рук.
 И се валы его познали,
 Норвежски Горы возстенали;
 Воздулась бездна к небесам,
 Ужасны встали непогоды,
Шумят леса, взрвели воды,
 И воздрогнул Еол и сам.

(Sumarokov 1787b: 175)

4 Conclusion

Thus, the results obtained in the research described in this paper show that in the Russian iambic tetrameter not only lines tend to form rhythmical and syntactical stereotypes, as was noted by O. Brik (1927: 36–37), but so do odic stanzas of the same meter. These traditional stanzas tends to grow considerably formulaic—in terms of both rhythm and grammar.

A similar observation was made by I. Lilly (2004: 396), based on his analysis of verbs and nouns in rhymes of the odic stanza—he argues that the iambic decastich becomes “automated”. In regard to style and themes, a similar idea was expressed by N. Alekseeva (2005: 296), author of an erudite study devoted to the history of the Russian ode: she mentions that the odic mentality utilizes semantic “bricks” or “blocks”, and whenever a certain “block” is used, this implies a certain range of corresponding elements that should follow.

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