

The Prosody of Poetic Reading in Comparison with the Prosody of Everyday Speech

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at analyzing the prosody of so-called poetic reading. Poetic reading is exemplified by Joseph Brodsky's reading of his own verse and the writings of other authors. Poetic reading is analyzed in comparison with ordinary spoken speech, where the prosody designates a variety of meanings that form sentences as speech acts and texts—as connected units of discourse. The paper is illustrated throughout with frequency tracings of sound recordings. The software program Praat is used in the process of analyzing the sound data.

1 Introduction

Yury Tynyanov, following Meumann (1894), differentiated between the phrasal type of verse reading, which is aimed at reconstructing the content of verse, and rhythmic reading, which highlights the metrical aspect of spoken verse (Тынянов 2002[1924]: 43). B. M. Eikhenbaum noted that highlighting the content when reading is characteristic of actors, while rhythmic reading is characteristic of poets (Эйхенбаум 1924).

Joseph Brodsky consistently used the rhythmic manner of reading, where all accents, pauses, and length variations are aimed at forming the rhythmic units of verse. He ignored all linguistic meanings—topics, foci, discourse continuity—that are designated by prosody. In this manner of recitation, the obligatory linguistic meanings remained unexpressed. Nevertheless, the prosodic system used by Brodsky is connected not only with the rhythmic structure of verse but is also aimed at designating some specific, non-linguistic, variety of meanings. These meanings are not random, they are organized in a system, and they belong not to the Russian language, but to a specific strategy of recitation.

Thus, my goal is to demonstrate that rhythmic reading can have an informative aspect. Brodsky develops a rather simple—unsophisticated—system for designating meanings, deliberately rejecting the system of meanings designated by prosody in the Russian language. In the majority of cases, poets preserve in their reading—either in full, or in part—the prosodies that are characteristic of natural spoken speech. Brodsky’s reading is practically free of Russian prosody. Reconstructing the system of meanings in Brodsky’s reading is the goal of this paper. Access to these meanings is provided by the prosodic system Brodsky uses.

The software program Praat is used to analyze the sound data. The system shows the transforms of the fundamental frequency of the human voice. On the graph, the axis of abscissas shows the time elapsed from the beginning of the tracing in seconds, while the ordinate axis represents the oscillation frequency in Hertz.

The paper contains three sections. Section 2 deals with the Russian prosodic means of expressing linguistic meanings: topic, focus, and discourse continuity. These means are described in (*Брызгунова* 1982). The goal of this section is to establish a reference system to which Brodsky’s system is compared. Hence, in Section 2, I demonstrate the prosody used by Brodsky and other people when they speak and in Section 3 I demonstrate the prosody Brodsky uses when he recites verse. Brodsky’s poetic reading is compared not only with his spontaneous speech but also with the recitation of the actor Mikhail Kozakov, who, when reading Brodsky’s verse, preserves the system of the Russian linguistic meanings and their prosodic representation.

In Section 4, I introduce the concept of the minimal poetic unit in Brodsky’s reading system and consider his reading verse of various genres and lengths. In the Conclusion, I formulate the main parameters of the semiotic system used by Brodsky.

2 An overview of Russian prosody

In this section the examples from an interview given by Brodsky to journalists and the fragments from Kozakov’s reading a prosaic text illustrate the principal meanings expressed through Russian prosody. I do not see any cardinal difference between the means of expression in spontaneous speech and in prosaic reading. Hence, I analyze Brodsky’s spontaneous speech and Kozakov’s reading on equal terms. Consider a simple example from Kozakov’s reading the stories of Koval:

(1) *Нюрка была веселая* (Cited from *Коваль* 2012).

Sentence (1) has the topic *Нюрка* and the focus *была веселая*. As we see in FIG.1, the tonic syllable of the topic shows a rise in the fundamental frequency, the post-tonic syllable shows a fall. This is a standard means for expressing the topic. The tonic syllable of the accent-bearer shows a fall followed by a subsequent fall on the post-tonic syllables of the word *веселая*, cf. FIG. 1. Such a fall is a cue for the focus. Similarly, the topic-focus structure of a statement is also expressed in a spoken recollection by Brodsky:

(2) *Когда-то мне Гослит заказал переводы такого итальянского поэта Умберто Саба.*

The graph in FIG. 2 demonstrates the three rises in frequency on the tonic syllables of the words *когда-то*, *Гослит*, and *переводы*. These words are the accent-bearers of the three topics of the sentence: *когда-то*, *мне Гослит* and *заказал переводы*. The word *Гослит* carries the highest rise in frequency. The accent-bearers of the topics *когда-то* and *переводы* carry relatively high post-tonics after the rise on the tonic syllable. This is another type of Russian rise, which serves (as well as the first type, which is followed by a fall on the post-tonics, if any, e.g. in the word *Нюрка*) as a marker of the topic. The accent-bearer of the focus—*такого итальянского поэта Умберто Саба*—the word *Саба*—shows a fall.

Examples (3) from Kozakov's reading and (4) from Brodsky's speech illustrate some means for the prosodic expression of discourse continuity (that is, 'the current step of discourse is not the last, a continuation of the story is expected'). Sentence (3) has a cue for discourse continuity: a rise on the accent-bearer of discourse continuity the word *дня*, cf. FIG. 3. The marker of continuity is preceded by a focal fall on the word *неделя*. This is an example of one specific strategy for marking continuity in Russian, when the continuity marker is placed after the accent-bearer of the focus.

(3) *Прошла неделя после этого дня, и наступило первое сентября.*

Within the structure of the compound sentence (3), the second sentence *наступило первое сентября* serves in its entirety as a focus with the accent-bearer *сентября*, which shows a fall.

Example (4) is the first sentence of Brodsky's story about his first visit to Venice:

(4) *Я купил билетик на самолет, и прилетел в Италию, пересадка была в Милане, чуть не опоздал, и приехал сюда.*

Example (4) depicts five steps in the narration: 1) 'I bought a ticket for a plane'; 2) 'I arrived in Italy'; 3) 'The connection was in Milan'; 4) 'I was nearly late'; 5) 'I came here'. As we see in FIG. 4, the first four steps of the narration are each marked with one of the Russian rises: a rise followed by a fall, if any, (steps 1), 3), and 4)), or a rise

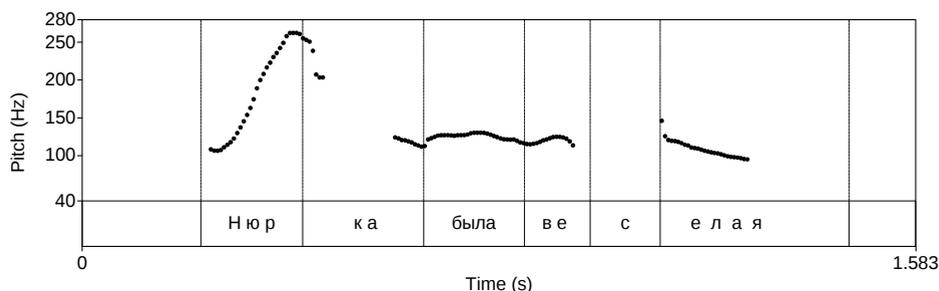


FIG. 1: The frequency tracing of example (1)

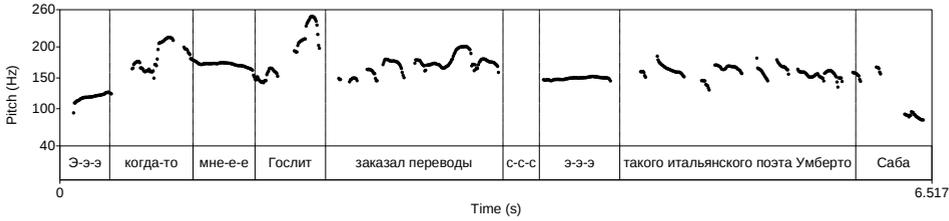


FIG. 2: The frequency tracing of example (2)

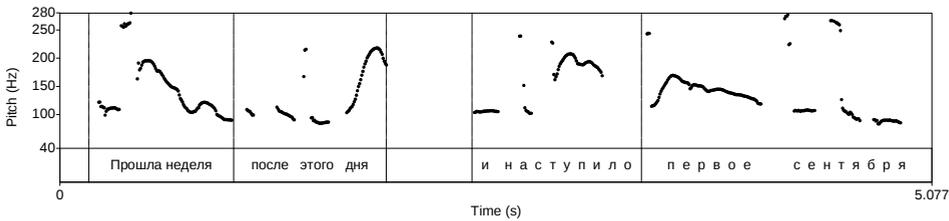


FIG. 3: The frequency tracing of example (3)

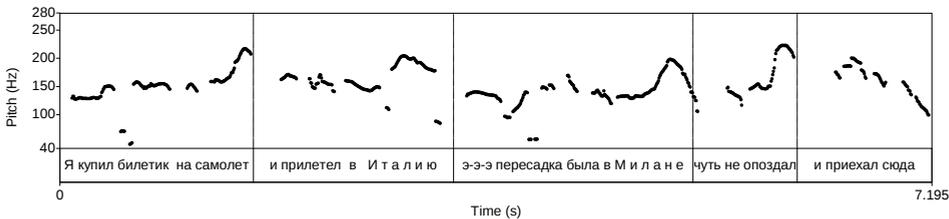


FIG. 4: The frequency tracing of example (4)

followed by relatively high post-tonics—the second step of narration. Lengthening of the tonic syllable adds to the prosody of discourse continuity the extra meaning of the speaker being absorbed in recollections. The final—the fifth—step of the series is marked by the expected fall on the accent-bearer of the last focus in the compound sentence: the episode is coming to the end, the speaker is putting in a full stop.

In this section, the four examples from the spoken speech of Brodsky and Kozakov demonstrate the principal communicative meanings and their means of expression used in Russian. These are as follows. 1) A rise on the tonic syllable followed by a substantial fall on the post-tonics, if any; this designates the topic and discourse continuity. 2) A rise followed by level or slightly falling post-tonics can also designate the topic. 3) A rise of the latter type characterized by lengthening of duration designates discourse continuity combined with the meaning of a focus on thoughts, dreams, or recollections. 4) A fall on the tonic syllable, followed by low post-tonics marks the focus. If there are no rising accents after the focus, it means that narrative series has come to an end.

Without marking topics, foci, and discourse continuity, there can be no spoken discourse. Although the inventory of meanings given here is not exhaustive, the above examples seem sufficient to serve as a background for describing the new prosodic system developed by Brodsky.

FIG. 5 below represents a fragment from Brodsky's conversation with journalists. During the interview, Brodsky recited his verse. In the segment before the dotted vertical line he was reciting verse; the segment after the line—corresponds to ordinary speech.

The graph in FIG. 5 demonstrates some characteristics that differentiate Brodsky's recitation of verse from his spontaneous speech: the monotony of verse reading, its tendency toward the medial frequency of the speaker's pitch range, a narrowing of the pitch range, and the lack of falls, except for the final fall in frequency at the end of a poetic unit (immediately before the vertical dotted line). The manner of Brodsky's verse recitation is detailed in Section 3 below.

3 The prosody of poetic reading

I begin the analysis of Brodsky's poetic reading with a concrete example. Consider Brodsky's poem "Ниоткуда с любовью" 'From nowhere with love': *Ниоткуда с любовью, надцатого мартабря, / дорогой, уважаемый, милая, но не важно / даже кто, ибо черт лица, говоря / откровенно, не вспомнить уже, не ваш, но / и ничей верный друг вас приветствует с одного / из пяти континентов, держащегося на ковбоях; / я любил тебя больше, чем ангелов и самого, / и поэтому дальше теперь от тебя, чем от них обоих; // поздно ночью, в уснувшей долине, на самом дне, / в городке, занесенном снегом по ручку двери, / извиваясь ночью на простыне — / как не сказано ниже, по крайней мере — / я взбиваю подушку мычащим "ты" / за морями, которым конца и края, / в темноте всем телом твои черты, / как безумное зеркало повторяя.* (Cited from *Бродский* 1994). (The end of a line in written verse is marked by a slash (/)).

Consider the same fragment (5) as read out by Brodsky and Kozakov. Brodsky invariably follows the rhythmic manner of reading while Kozakov is pronouncedly informative.

(5) ...но не важно / даже кто, ибо черт лица, говоря / откровенно, не вспомнить уже...

Fig. 6 depicts the graphs of reading fragment (5): the upper graph demonstrates Brodsky's reading, while the lower graph—shows Kozakov's reading.

As we see in FIG. 6, Brodsky read out the fragment in 6.5 seconds, while it took Kozakov 8.5 seconds to read the same text.

I begin by analyzing Kozakov's reading, because he preserves (and even emphasizes) all the prosodies developed in language for designating communicative meanings. Kozakov zealously employs the methods of so-called expressive reading. The graph shows him dividing the fragment *черт лица, говоря откровенно, не вспомнить уже* into the topic *черт лица* and the focus *не вспомнить уже* with a distinct—

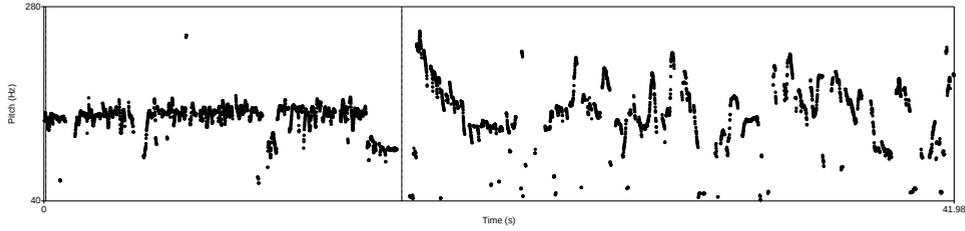


FIG. 5: The frequency tracing of verse reading followed by ordinary speech. Brodsky

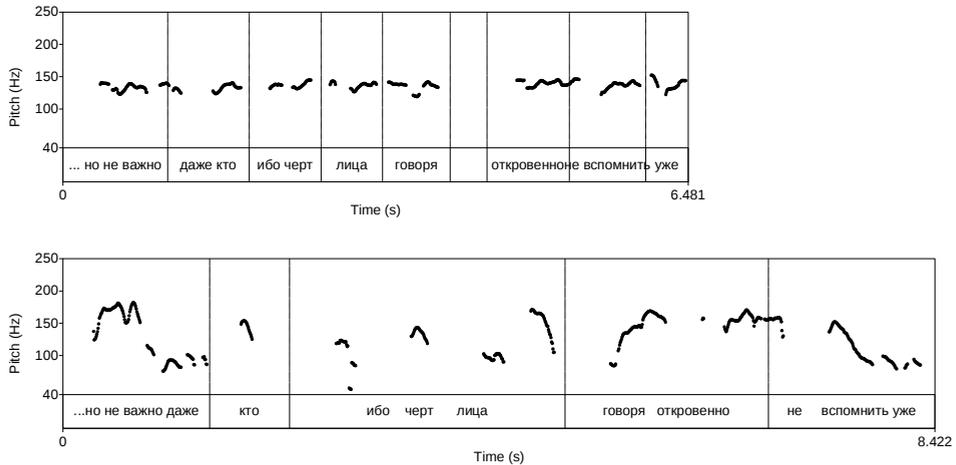


FIG. 6: The comparative frequency of reading example (5) by J. Brodsky, and M. Kozakov

“focal”—fall on *вспомнить* and extremely low frequency on the post-tonic *уже*. The prosody of parentheses—a rise followed by high level post-tonics in shortened tempo—appears on *говоря откровенно*. The pitch range in Kozakov’s reading, both on falls and rises, is rather wide, while the level tone on *откровенно не*—is strictly maintained. Kozakov does not ignore any of the language’s prosodies; he is skilled at employing prosodic means for expressing communicative meanings.

Brodsky, in his reading, demonstrates a complete denial of the topical, focal, and other meanings expressed by prosody. The basic element of his reading comprises a rise to a slightly higher value on the tonic syllable of each phonetic word in a line. (A phonetic word is the tonic syllable of a word together with atonic syllables and atonic words cliticized to this word.) In FIG. 6 (upper graph) we can see monotonous rises on the phonetic words *не важно*, *даже кто*, *черт* and *лица*. *Говоря* and *откровенно* are also articulated absolutely identically, which is completely incompatible with the prosody of Russian. We see the same rise on *не вспомнить* and even on the post-tonic (in standard Russian pronunciation) *уже*. Falls in frequency as the expected signals for designating the focus are absent. The lack of any falls up to the very end of a poem is a characteristic parameter of Brodsky’s reading. All his pauses are also not cues for dividing the communicatively relevant components of speech

acts from other components, or speech acts from each other: Brodsky uses a pause only for catching his breath. The monotonous manner of reading is accompanied by a rise in the medial frequency and an increase in the tempo as the speaker approaches the end of the text. FIG. 7 depicts a compressed frequency tracing of the poem “*Никтокуда с любовью*” as a whole.

The reading of the poem begins with a medial frequency of about 140 Hertz. The pre-final medial frequency increases to 180 Hertz. This is demonstrated by the frequency tracing, which exhibits a gradual rise. On the two final phonetic words, *зеркало* and *повторяя*, the author returns to the frequency at the beginning; cf. the final fragment of the frequency tracing in FIG. 7 and, separately, in example (6), FIG. 8.

(6) *...твои черты, / как безумное зеркало повторяя.*

The frequency of the last tonic syllable is 140 Hertz, while the frequency of the final post-tonic syllable is 120 Hertz. This final falling in frequency and tempo, which is similar to the focal pattern, signals the end of the poem. The reading takes 60 seconds even though Brodsky makes a slip of the tongue and wastes three seconds to correct it. Kozakov’s reading takes 75 seconds. Brodsky reads the text in one breath and very fast, while Kozakov reads it emotionally and in a measured manner.

The rise in the frequency and tempo results from the increase in emotional tension. This is not a linguistic but a physiological parameter. It is widely known that nervous excitement can cause vocal frequency to increase. Brodsky employs this parameter for the purposes of his performance. The emotional tension climaxes with a sharp—theatrical—loss in frequency: a full stop occurs, the poem is over. This method is a means for effectuating the cohesion of a poetic work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Brodsky is employing this means in a brief lyric poem. “*Никтокуда с любовью*”, even without its specific prosody, is regarded as an integral unit. This integrative tendency is also signaled by the absence of commas, full stops, and capital letters; along with the extensive use of *enjambement* (*не ваш, но / и ничей верный друг вас приветствует с одного / из пяти континентов...*), which can combine two or more lines into one syntactic whole.

Similarly, a poem by Pasternak (2004–2005)—“*Магдалина (II)*” (‘Magdalene’)—is recited by Brodsky in his peculiar manner, integrating the whole poem into a single poetic unit, cf. FIG. 9.

This work is of a rather substantial length—it takes Brodsky a minute and a half to recite it—and, of course, Brodsky uses a variety of means to establish boundaries between lines and/or stanzas. At the same time, the boundaries between the stanzas are not consistent. Consider example (7), which includes the break between the second and the third stanzas (*...твое. // Шарю...*), where, theoretically, one could expect a prosodic boundary marker. However, no such marker is present. Two slashes (//) are used to divide stanzas in the printed version of a poetic text:

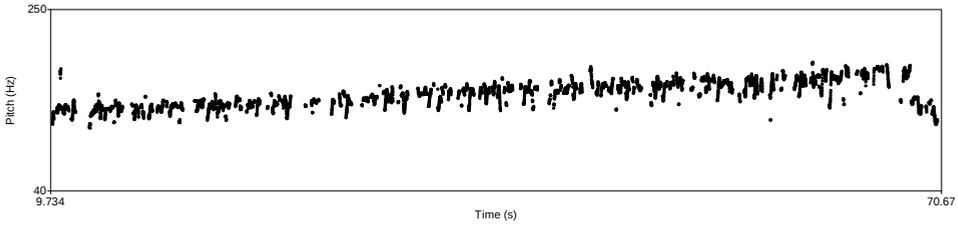


FIG. 7: Frequency tracing for Brodsky's reciting of his poem "Ниоткуда с любовью"

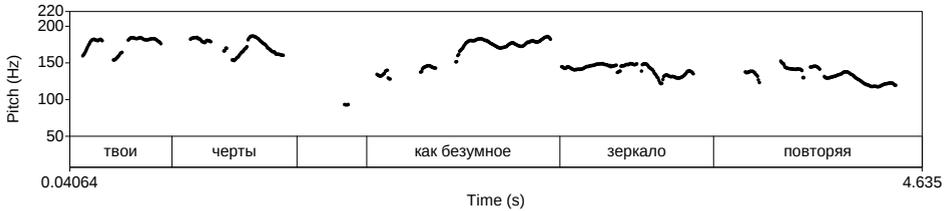


FIG. 8: Frequency tracing for example (6)

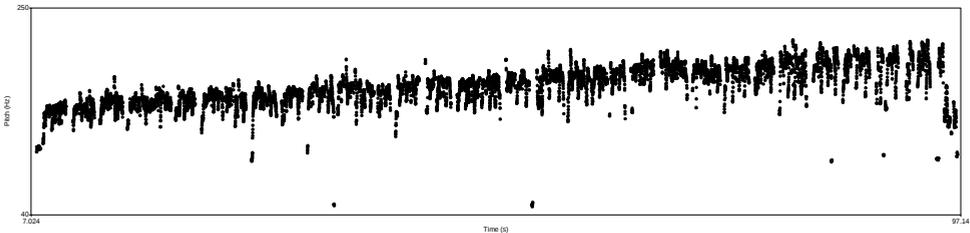


FIG. 9: Frequency tracing for Brodsky's recitation of Pasternak's "Магдалина (II)"

- (7) *Обмываю миром из ведерка / Я стопы пречистые твои. // Шарю и не нахожу
сандалий. / Ничего не вижу из-за слез* (Пастернак 2004-2005).

FIG. 10 shows that the main prosodic boundaries in Brodsky's style of reading are a slight pause and a rise in frequency (in a narrowed pitch range) on the tonic syllable of a phonetic word. However, the principal means for forming the minimal poetic unit—returning to the low frequency that is at the beginning of a unit—is not employed here. The graph shows that at the very boundary of stanzas (...*твои. // Шарю*...) neither a pause nor the expected rise in the frequency at the tonic syllable of the word *шарю* occurs: I regard these phenomena as indicating the unified nature of a verse passage.

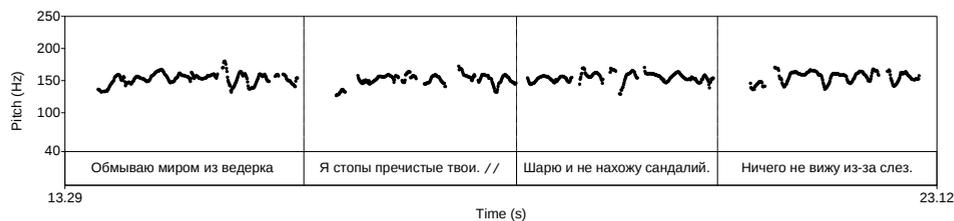


FIG. 10: The frequency tracing of example (7)

The preliminary results of my analysis are as follows:

- within the limits of a minimal poetic unit the consistent use of boundaries of any types is lacking,
- the medial frequency is increasing,
- at the end of a minimal poetic unit, Brodsky returns to the frequencies at the beginning of the unit.

4 Poetic passages containing more than one minimal poetic unit

In narrative verse, the method for integrating the text into a single unit is applied to a smaller structural component of the text than the whole poem. Thus, in “*Письма римскому другу*” ‘Letters to a Roman friend’ the prosodic means, exemplified in Section 3 by Brodsky’s readings of the poems “*Ниоткуда с любовью*” and “*Магдалина (II)*”, is applied to a single “letter”. Fragment (8), consisting of two stanzas and integrated by the author into a single unit, represents one of the “letters”:

(8) *Посылаю тебе, Постум, эти книги. / Что в столице? Мягко стелют? Спать не жестко? / Как там Цезарь? Чем он занят? Все интриги? / Все интриги, вероятно, да обжорство. // Я сижу в своем саду, горит светильник. / Ни подруги, ни прислуги, ни знакомых. / Вместо слабых мира этого и сильных — / лишь согласное гуденье насекомых.* (Cited from Бродский 1994).

FIG. 11 demonstrates the already recognizable prosodic contour characterized by the gradual increase in the frequency on the tonic syllable of each phonetic word and a fall on the final noun phrase *гуденье насекомых*. In FIG. 11, each line is divided from its neighboring lines by vertical dotted intervals. There are no visible prosodic boundaries at the ends of the lines.

In all, the poem has eighteen stanzas and, consequently, nine similar prosodic units each consisting of two stanzas. FIG. 12 depicts the compressed frequency tracing for the entire poem.

FIG. 12 shows that the means for forming the minimal poetic unit in “*Письма римскому другу*” is used nine times—in accordance with the number of “letters”.



FIG. 11: Frequency tracing of the third and the fourth stanzas of “*Письма римскому другу*”

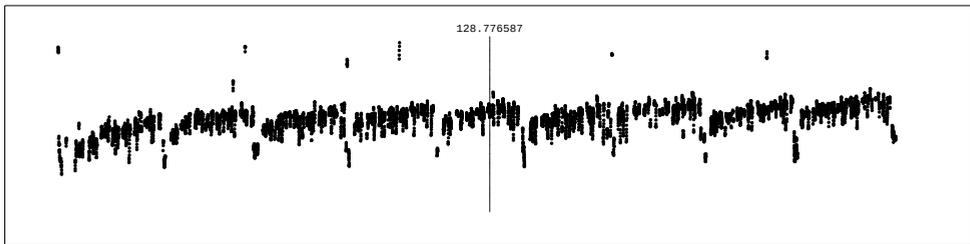


FIG. 12: The frequency tracing of Brodsky’s reading “*Письма римскому другу*”

I hypothesize, that the most important objective of Brodsky’s method is to ensure that the speech acts in the discourse of a verse lack a rational division into relevant components such as topics and foci. The goal is for the spoken poetic text to produce a captivating effect.

Brodsky’s poem “*Сретенье*” ‘Candlemas’ has a clear plot. It is a story about Saint Simeon’s meeting with the newborn Jesus Christ. In his reading, Brodsky singles out ten separate episodes. 1) Mary and the child come to the temple where Saint Simeon and Anna the Prophetess welcome them. 2) Simeon takes the child from Mary. 3) In the dusk of the temple, a ray of light appears at the top of the child’s head. 4) Simeon understands that he is seeing the son of the Almighty. 5) Simeon’s words echo beneath the arches of the temple. 7) Everybody remains silent. Simeon predicts glory and great suffering for the child. 8) Simeon heads to the temple’s exit. 9) Simeon hears the voice of the Prophetess and realizes that it was not him whom she was addressing: his life has come to the end. 10) The image of the child lights up the path for the soul of Simeon. FIG. 13 depicts the compressed prosodic contour of Brodsky’s reading of the poem.

The graph in FIG. 13 (exactly like the graph in FIG. 12) is shaped like stairs, and each “stair” refers, as I hypothesize, to a minimal poetic unit. In “*Письма римскому другу*”, the minimal poetic unit is a “letter” that contains two stanzas. In “*Сретенье*”, a minimal poetic unit can refer to sections of various lengths. As the end of a minimal poetic unit, I consider the point in a text where Brodsky uses his end marker, namely, a fall in the frequency—returning to the frequency at the beginning of a unit.

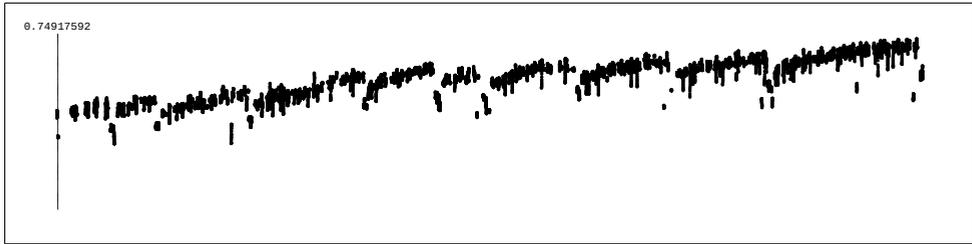


FIG. 13: The frequency tracing of reading poem “Сретенье” by Brodsky

In “Сретенье”, the boundaries between the minimal poetic units do not always coincide with the boundaries between the stanzas. For instance, the boundaries after the first and second minimal poetic units coincide with the boundaries of the corresponding stanzas, while the boundary between the fourth and the fifth poetic units appears in the middle of the seventh stanza. The tenth poetic unit occupies the final three stanzas: at the end of the poem the size of a minimal poetic unit grows, the tempo and the medial frequency increase, and the emotional tension rises, so that at the end it can, as in music, conclude with an abrupt fall in tempo and frequency.

FIG. 14 represents the reading of the same poem by Kozakov.

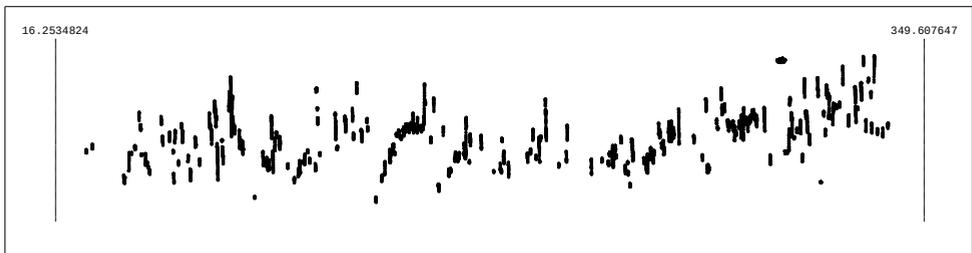


FIG. 14.: The frequency tracing for Kozakov's reading “Сретенье”

The compressed frequency tracing in FIG. 14 shows that Kozakov's reading is much less rhythmic and much more varied than Brodsky's. Kozakov's reading represents a conceptual interpretation of the text's structure. It is aimed at reconstructing the syntactic relations and preserving the meaning of the text. A comparative analysis of the frequency tracings shows that Kozakov employs the prosody of language, while Brodsky employs his personal prosodies for dividing a text into minimal poetic units.

5 Conclusion

Brodsky developed a highly consistent and very simple prosodic organization for the spoken poetic text based on the following markers:

- a rise on the tonic syllable of each phonetic word in a poetic text;
- an increase in the medial frequency in each minimal poetic unit;
- a final fall in the frequency at the end of each minimal poetic unit;
- an increase in the medial frequency from one minimal poetic unit to the next minimal poetic unit in advancing towards the end of the entire text.

Brodsky's manner of reading forms a kind of semiotic system, which treats the spoken poetic text as a structure.

Acknowledgments

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