Žirmunskij's Theory of Verse: A Review Article

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The occasion for this review article is the appearance of V. M. Žirmunskij's *Vvedenie v metriku* in an English translation.[1] It was first published in Russia in 1925 in a single edition of 2200 copies. Although it deals also with metrical problems in languages other than Russian, the bulk of the book is concerned with Russian poetry and the argument it advances is mainly supported by examples from Russian. It may appear, therefore, that the book is of only limited interest for the English reader of 1968. This appearance is entirely misleading. Although it was published 43 years ago, there is little in the book that should strike the contemporary reader as antiquated or obsolete. Few studies in Western languages can rival Žirmunskij's work in understanding and, above all, in good common sense. I know of only one book in English— Robert Bridges' *Milton's Prosody* (1921; photomechanically reissued by Oxford Univ. Press in 1965) from which a student of metrics can learn as much as he can from a close study of Žirmunskij's book.

Introduction to Metrics is concerned with "theoretical metrics" (p. 18), which in the author's view is the discipline that "must explain the interrelationship between the ideal metrical scheme operating in a given poem and its actual implementation. Theoretical metrics constructs that system of concepts which are used by other branches of this science in their classification of metrical devices." (p. 18.) The entities that are dealt with by theoretical metrics are, therefore, according to Žirmunskij, abstract, theoretical constructs which are distinct from the phonetic facts of a particular line of verse. "Phonetics studies *facts*; metrics studies the *norms* which govern the phonetic facts of poetic language" (p. 17).

It is at this point that we encounter the major theoretical shortcoming of the book. Žirmunskij's conception of the nature of the interrelationship between the ideal metrical scheme and its implementation in a concrete line of verse is excessively rigid. He believes that this relationship must always be one : one, that to each metrical entity there must correspond a particular phonetic entity, and that this correspondence must be unambiguously resolvable in all cases. Thus, like most students of metrics, Žirmunskij assumes that metrically strong positions must be occupied by more heavily stressed syllables and metrically weak positions by less heavily stressed or completely unstressed syllables. As a result of requiring this very direct relationship between the abstract meter and its concrete embodiment, conceptual and practical difficulties arise that could readily be side-stepped if a less direct, more mediate relationship between meter and verse line were admitted by the theory.

The major difficulty with the proposed direct relationship between abstract metrical entity and its concrete phonetic embodiment is that it does not hold even in the very simplest cases. Thus, in discussing the first four lines of *Evgenij Onegin*, Žirmunskij notes that "only the first line fulfills the requirements of the metrical scheme

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of iambic tetrameter: i.e., it stresses all four even-numbered syllables. In the second line a stress is omitted on the sixth syllable . . . in the third line the required stress is missing on the second syllable . . . and in the fourth line it is again the sixth syllable which departs from the metrical pattern. . . ." (p. 37.)

It hardly needs saying that a pattern which can be breached as freely as that is not much of a pattern. Something is clearly wrong. I shall try to show that what is wrong is not the common conception of the iambic pattern as of an alternation of strong and weak positions, but rather the equally common (mis)conception that there must be a one:one relationship between entities in the meter and phonetic entities in the line.

Žirmunskij is rightly uncomfortable with the conclusion that metrical patterns are honored more in the breach than in the observance. He realizes that one cannot escape from the problem by weakening the conditions that a line must satisfy in order to be metrically regular. For instance, it has been suggested by V. V. Nedobrovo that in the iambic tetrameter the only constant requirements are the number of syllables and the constant, obligatory stress on the last strong position. Žirmunskij shows that this proposal is untenable by composing a variant of the first four lines of *Evgenij Onegin* in which the above metrical constants are observed, yet the lines are obviously unmetrical. This leads him to conclude that "not any and every distribution of stresses is admissible on the first seven syllables of the Russian iambic tetrameter" (p. 64); "even in the binary meters which permit far more 'deviations' than the ternaries, there are definite rules and limitations" (p. 65).

Since this way out of the difficulty is closed to him, Žirmunskij naturally looks for other alternatives. He proposes that it would be possible to account for the most common "deviation" from one:one correspondence if in addition to syllables with actual stress we were to recognize "syllables stressed in principle." He would then explain the fact that strong positions are frequently occupied by stressless syllables on the grounds that "each even syllable in the iambic meter, even though it does not in fact bear a stress, is perceived by us as a syllable *stressed in principle* because of the rhythmical inertia of the whole poem" (p. 65). Strangely, Žirmunskij fails to see that this solves nothing. If the metrically strong position is always occupied by a stressed syllable, either one that is stressed in reality or one that is "stressed in principle," then the problem is simply transposed to discovering the conditions under which strong positions may be occupied by syllables stressed in principle.

The solution to the difficulty lies, I believe, in admitting a somewhat indirect relationship between metrical and phonetic entities. As a first approximation we might say that the principle of syllabo-tonic verse is that

(1)   strong positions may be occupied by stressed and unstressed syllables; weak positions may be occupied by unstressed syllables *only*.

This view coincides in essence with the suggestion by Ščerba, who wrote in 1923: "By the term 'iamb' I refer only to the absence of stress on odd syllables."[2] Note that (1) institutes a less direct relationship between metrical and phonetic entities than that proposed by Žirmunskij, for it allows both stressed and unstressed syllables to occupy metrically strong positions, whereas Žirmunskij would allow only stressed syllables (although as we have seen these could be stressed either in reality or only "in principle").

Interpretive principle (1) properly accounts for the "deviations" that are due to the occurrence of an unstressed syllable in a strong position in the line. It fails, however, to account for the well-known "allowable deviation," where a stressed syllable occurs in a weak metrical position. The treatment of the questions raised by

these deviations is perhaps the most interesting part of the book, and Sections 17, 18, and 19 should be made required reading not only for students of Russian metrics, but also for anyone interested in problems of Russian phonetics. If Žirmunskij fails to resolve the problem completely, this is due to the book's major theoretical flaw: Žirmunskij's insistence that there must be a rigid one : one relationship between metrical entities and their embodiments in concrete lines of verse.

We begin by considering the well-known instances where a metrically weak position is occupied by a fully stressed word. Žirmunskij observes that "the chief limitation on the distribution of such stresses is that they occur only in monosyllabic words. . . . Furthermore, a monosyllabic word, even one with a full lexical meaning, can in a syntactic construction be subordinated to the predominating stress of the adjacent word. . . ." (p. 65.) He notes, moreover, that "according to Ščerba's observation the normal phrase accent, if it does not serve to emphasize the sense of what is being said, occurs in Russian at the end of a phrase group" (p. 93, n. 10). Hence, when a monosyllabic word is followed by another word with initial stress the phonetic stress on the first word will be less than on the second:

(2)   mel'knút *dvé tény*. Sérdce dévy tómnoj   (*Domik v Kolomne*)
      tomù *lét vósem'*, bédnaja starúška   (*Domik v Kolomne*)
      u névskoj prístani. *Dní léta*   (*Mednyj vsadnik*)
      mež tèm *cél' ódy* vysoká   (*Evgenij Onegin*).

In *dve teni* the stress on the numeral is less than on the noun in line with the principle just enunciated that the greater stress falls on the last member of the phrase. For the same reason in *let vosem'* the stress on the numeral is greater than that on the noun.

Since the examples (2) show that words with main lexical stress may occupy metrically weak positions only under very special conditions of stress subordination, it is necessary to modify the interpretive principle (1).

I should like to propose that instead of regulating the location of stressless syllables in the line, syllabo-tonic verse regulates the location of *stress maxima,* which I shall define as follows:

(3)   a stress maximum is constituted by a syllable bearing main stress in a fully stressed word when this syllable has more stress than the two syllables that are adjacent to it in the line and that belong to the same syntactic constituent and are, therefore, subject to the normal rules of stress subordination.

Given this definition of the stress maximum, we must now rephrase (1) as (4):

(4)   strong positions may be occupied by syllables whether or not they are stress maxima; weak positions may never be occupied by stress maxima.

We must now review in the light of definitions (3) and (4) the major unresolved questions of Russian syllabo-tonic verse. Consider first the question why stressed monosyllabic words may occur in weak positions, whereas the stressed syllable of polysyllabic words may not. When a monosyllabic word precedes a stressed syllable, the stress on the monosyllabic word is no longer a stress maximum, hence it can occur freely in a metrically weak position without violating the meter. In a polysyllabic word this will not be the case, except when a polysyllabic word with final stress is followed by a word with initial stress; e.g., *golová sýna*. Although in this phrase the fourth syllable would constitute the only stress maximum, such sequences do not occur in Russian verse since, as noted by Žirmunskij, cited above, a metrically weak position may be occupied by a stressed syllable only if it is in a

monosyllabic word.[3] Russian syllabo-tonic verse is, therefore, subject to the special constraint that

    (5)   in binary meters a fully stressed syllable may occupy a weak position only if it is in a monosyllabic word.

Principles (3), (4), and (5) account also for the well-known instances of lists such as

    (6)   slová: *bór*, búrja, vóron, él'   (*Evgenij Onegin*)
           polják, *túrk*, pérs, *prús*, xín i švédy   (Deržavin).

Since in a list there is no syntactic subordination, all words in a list have identical stresses. Consequently none of them are stress maxima (cf. definition [3]). According to (4) only stress maxima are excluded from weak positions, hence none of the italicized words violate the metrical pattern.

    Similarly the absence of syntactic subordination renders the italicized words in (7) incapable of being stress maxima. As a result, the cited lines do not constitute violations of principle (4).

    (7)   grammátiku, *dvé* petriády   (*Evgenij Onegin*)
           ležít na nàs—*vdrúg*, znáet bóg, otkúda   (Tjutčev).

It follows from definition (3) that the initial position in a line of verse can never be a stress maximum since it lacks one of the two adjacent syllables required by the definition. This fact explains immediately why inverted first feet are one of the most common deviations found in iambic meters. It is interesting that in Russian binary meters the restriction that only monosyllabic words can occupy a metrically weak position is enforced especially in these cases. Thus there are numerous instances of the type (8):

    (8)   *p'ét obo*l'stítel'nyj obmán   (*Evgenij Onegin*)
           *mýsl' iz*rečénnaja èst' lóž'   (Tjutčev).

However, as Žirmunskij remarks, instances such as Brjusov's

    (9)   *tájna?* àx, vót čto! kàk v románe jà . . .

are regarded "as a deformation of the line" (p. 67). In this respect Russian differs from English syllabo-tonic verse, where lines of this type are quite common; e.g., the well-known

    (10)   *sílent* upòn a péak in Dárien[4]   (Keats).

Moreover, the restriction to monosyllabic words does not seem to extend to Russian ternary meters. In initial position we find polysyllabic words in anapestic lines quite commonly; e.g.,

    (11)   sónnyj vózdux potrjás, ì iz pény morskój   (Polonskij)
           snóva ptícy letját izdaléka   (Fet)
           sólnce téploe xódit vysóko   (Fet).

The restriction is not observed even in the middle of the line as shown by (12), which is cited by Žirmunskij (p. 67):

    (12)   okružús' jà togdá *gór'koj* sládost'ju róz.

    The line from Keats in (10) points up a further difference between Russian and English metrical conventions. In English iambic verse the last strong position of the verse is generally treated on a par with all other strong positions and need, therefore, not be occupied by a stressed syllable; in Russian the appearance of a stressed syllable in the last strong position of the verse is mandatory. This stressed vowel, however, need not constitute a stress maximum; in fact, it can be the weakly stressed vowel of such auxiliaries as the pronouns *ja, ty, on*; the conjunctions *no, i*; the special prepositions *skvoz', protiv*; the pronoun-adjectives *moj, tvoj, vse*; *kto*, etc. All these are stressed, as can be seen from the fact that, e.g., in standard literary Russian they do not undergo akan'e or ikan'e; but their degree of stress is con-

siderably less than that of full words. They rime, however, with fully stressed words, as in the following examples:
> (13)   da oxranjúsja jà ot múšek
> ot dév neznájuščix *ljubví*
> ot drúžby slíškom *néžnoj* ì ...
> ot romantíčeskix starúšek   (Lermontov)
>
> kogdá b ostávili *menjà*
> na vóle, kàk by *rézvo jà*   (Puškin).

These examples demonstrate the need for an additional principle:
> (14)   the last strong position in a verse must be occupied by a stressed syllable of some kind.

These secondary stresses are apparently treated on a par with totally stressless syllables in other positions. Although clear examples are not plentiful; lines such as those in (15) are regarded as metrically regular in spite of the fact that in them secondary stresses occupy weak positions and are flanked by two stressless vowels, thus constituting some sort of phonetic stress maximum, in apparent violation of (4):
> (15)   v zavétnuju *ìx* citadél'   (Tjutčev)
> gnušáemsja *mỳ*. Počemú sprošú   (*Domik v Kolomne*).

Whether secondary stresses should be regarded on a par with stressed or with stressless vowels when establishing stress maxima was apparently a subject of some discussion in the early nineteenth century. Žirmunskij tells us that "Metropolitan Evgenij Bolxovitinov, an opponent of Lomonosov's system, in his letter to Deržavin (1815), also accused Lomonosov and Tred'jakovskij of having 'made our monosyllabic words, which are long by nature, into short ones.' " For example, "Lomonosov regards as iambic the line 'on bog, on bog tvoj byl Rossija.' But these are spondees, not iambs. And amongst the trochees he includes 'gospodi, kto obitaet' . . . But that is dactylic, not trochaic!" (p. 100, n. 13.) The last example is particularly telling, for if *kto,* which occupies the fourth position in the verse, is taken as fully stressed, the line would violate the canon for trochaic lines, where even positions are metrically weak. The line would then be dactylic, rather than trochaic. Since Lomonosov regarded this line as trochaic, it is clear that he viewed *kto* on a par with stressless syllables.

While on the question of secondary stress, we may correct an error that seems to have crept into Žirmunskij's discussion. It is not possible to include the numerals among the words that have secondary stress, as proposed by Žirmunskij (p. 100). Words with secondary stress can never have heavier stress than words with primary stress. Thus, the word *moj* has less stress than the word *drug* in both *moj drug* and *drug moj.* This is not true of the numerals; e.g., in *sto let* the numeral *sto* has lighter stress than the noun *let;* whereas in *let sto,* the stress relations are reversed (additional examples in [2] above). This shows that the numerals, like normal fully stressed words, are subject to stress subordination with primary stress going on the second word.

An intriguing problem is posed by the treatment of compound words. In Russian the first member of the compound may carry secondary stress, or it may be totally unaccented.[5] The problem of interest here arises in the case of compounds of the first type, for it is by no means self-evident how such secondary stresses should function in metrical verse. The answer is provided by the examples in (16) which are quoted by Žirmunskij on pp. 117-118:
> (16)   v *jàrko*-blestjáščem pýšnom zále   (Baratynskij)
> s *blèdno*-zelénoj grívoj ...   (Tjutčev).

This indicates that these secondary stresses—like the lexically determined secondary stresses found in pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, etc.—are treated on a par with stressless vowels. If that were not the case, the examples in (16) would constitute violations of condition (5), according to which primary stress in polysyllabic words cannot occupy metrically weak positions.

NOTES

1   V. Žirmunskij, *Introduction to Metrics: The Theory of Verse,* tr. by C. F. Brown, ed. with an Intr. by E. Stankiewicz and W. N. Vickery (Slavistic Printings and Reprintings, 58; The Hague, 1966); В. М. Жирмунский, «Введение в метрику: Теория стиха» (Вопросы поэтики, 6; Л., 1925).
       The work on this review article was supported principally by the National Institutes of Health (Grant MH-13390-01).
2   Л. В. Щерба, "Опыт лингвистического толкования стихотворения, 1," «Избранные работы по русском языку» (М., 1957), 37.
3   We shall see, however, that Žirmunskij's formulation is not exact; as he himself realizes, in ternary meters a weak position may be occupied by a stressed syllable of a polysyllabic word; cf. the examples in (11).
4   For additional examples see M. Halle and S. J. Keyser, "Chaucer and the Study of Prosody," *College English,* XXVIII (1966), 187–219; and S. J. Keyser, "The Linguistic Basis of English Prosody," to appear in a volume of readings edited by Sanford Schane and David Reibel.
5   In his review of G. Trager's *Introduction to Russian* in *SEER,* XXII (1944), 120–133, R. Jakobson states that Russian compounds have two stresses, "(a) if the first member retains its grammatical ending, (b) if the first member is a compound, or (c) if there is no syntactical subordination between the two members" (p. 122). If this is correct, the examples in (16) would have to be regarded as being without secondary stresses. In Р. И. Аванесов и С. И. Ожегов, ред., «Русское литературное произношение и ударение: Словарь-справочник» (М., 1959), however, items such as *blèdno-rózovyj, blèdno-golubój, jàrko-zelényj,* and *jàrko-sínij* are marked with secondary stresses as indicated, which would suggest that Jakobson's rule is somewhat too restrictive. Incidentally, Žirmunskij fails to distinguish compounds with secondary stresses from compounds without secondary stresses, and cites together with the examples in (16) cases such as "èst' v óseni *pervo*-načál'noj" and "s *novo*roždénnoju ix tén'ju" (Tjutčev). The latter examples, unlike (16), satisfy the conditions for the iambic meter without difficulty, as unstressed syllables may freely occur in all positions of the verse.
       I wish to express my gratitude to Professor K. Taranovski for an illuminating discussion of this and many other points touched on in this article.