

Metered prose: an experimental study on Russian

Kirill Bursov¹, Ksenia Kliueva², Elizaveta Shemshurina¹, Boris Orekhov¹, Natalia Slioussar¹
(slioussar@gmail.com)

¹HSE University, ²ITMO University

Prosaic texts sometimes contain metered fragments. Literary scholars view them as a stylistic device when studying fiction (for Russian, see [1,2]). However, it has not been explored so far whether ordinary readers react to them in any way, consciously or unconsciously. To address this question, we used a variety of **methods**, focusing on different aspects and different levels of the readers' perception: (i) measuring reading times (task **A**); (ii) estimating how much the readers liked the fragment, focusing their attention on its relevant properties (**B2**) or not (**B1**); (iii) asking to guess what the difference between the two types of fragments is (**C**); (iv) asking the readers to classify metered / unmetered fragments after an explicit instruction (**D**).

Although nobody studied metered fragments in prose experimentally, several **hypotheses** can be made (for the tasks A and B1/2). *Hyp. 1A*. In the literary studies, using metered prose is viewed as foregrounding. Other foregrounding devices slow the readers down [3,4], so we could expect the same. *Hyp. 1B*. However, metered poetry is read faster than unmetered [5]. *Hyp. 2*. Metered lines in poetry receive higher esthetic ratings than unmetered ones [5,6].

Our **materials** were 30 fragments from the 19th century Russian prose. Every fragment included a metered part (stimulus) that coincided with a complete clause and was 6-8 feet long (to make it salient enough) and a short context on the left (1a). We had 16 fragments with two-syllabic meters and 14 with three-syllabic ones. For every fragment, we created an unmetered control version introducing minor changes in the word order or auxiliary words (1b).

Design. Our **participants** (N=60) read the fragments in the self-paced reading mode: first the stimulus, then the context (task **A**) and were asked to estimate how good they sounded on the 1 to 5 scale (**B1**). Then the participants were divided in two groups. Group I was told that we introduced *some* changes into half of the fragments. Then we showed 14 pairs of fragments (in both conditions) and asked to select which one sounds better (**B2**). After that, we asked to guess what the difference between the fragments was (**C**). Group II was told that some fragments contained metered parts, with a detailed explanation. Then they saw the fragments from the first part and were asked to answer whether they contained metered parts (**D**).

Results and discussion. In the task **A**, metered fragments were read significantly faster, supporting the *Hyp. 1B* (Fig. 1). Metered fragments also received higher ratings in the tasks **B1** (Fig. 2) and **B2**, supporting the *Hyp. 2*. At the same time, we received *no* correct responses in the task **C**, and the average accuracy was as low as 52% in the task **D**. We can conclude that the readers react to metered prose (both in terms of reading times and esthetically), but do not discern metered fragments consciously, even when being explicitly instructed.

References

- [1] Orlickij, Ju. *Stix i proza v russkoj literature* (in Russian, 'Verse and prose in the Russian literature'). Moscow: RSUH, 2002.
- [2] Orekhov, B. V. Slučajnye metry v russkoj proze XIX veka (in Russian, 'Accidental meters in the Russian prose of the 19th century'). In: *Veščestvo poezii* (in Russian, 'The substance of poetry'). Moscow: RSUH, 2022.
- [3] Miall, D., Kuiken, D. Foregrounding, defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories. *Poetics*, 22, 1994, 389-407.
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- [5] Menninghaus, W., Wallot, S. What the eyes reveal about (reading) poetry. *Poetics*, 85, 2020, art. 101526.
- [6] van Peer, W. *Stylistics and Psychology: Investigations of Foregrounding*. London: Croom Helm, 1986.

Examples

- (1) a. Experimental:
Stimulus: *Ži'l on skro'mno, smi'mo, ti'xo, na'm ego' ne sly'shno by'lo* (trochaic, 7 feet).
Context: *Zdorov'e ne pozvoljalo emu xodit' postojanno v universitet*.
- b. Control:
Stimulus: *On žil skromno, smirno i tixo, nam bylo ego ne slyšno*.
Translation: 'He lived modestly, quietly (and) peacefully; we never heard from him. His health did not allow him to attend university regularly.'
Source: *Poor People* (Dostoevsky).

Figures and Tables

Fig. 1. Av. stimulus RTs in the task A (in log ms). Fig. 2. Average ratings in the task B1.

