

МОРФОЛОГИЯ, СИНТАКСИС

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VERSE AND PROSE: LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES*

It has been shown that there exist stable linguistic differences between verse and prosaic texts at all levels of their linguistic structure. Regularities in the linguistic structure of verse add up to a very peculiar system, which seems to be directed toward the activation of imaginative thinking at the expense of logical thought.

Intonation. Level within a narrow diapason, without emphasizing more important words at the expense of less important, verse intonation prevents us from quick and easy understanding of a text's logic.

Syntax. a) Regularities in the distribution of close and loose syntactic ties — which are similar for Russian, French, English, Spanish — serve to combine words of a line into a single unit.

b) Loose syntactic ties between lines support the division into lines — the basic units of a verse text;

c) Parataxis is much more frequent in verse at the expense of hypotaxis, especially between lines, which helps to make verse appear as a succession of speech segments without strict logical hierarchization; that is, of seemingly uniform semantic and information value. This is very different from hypotaxis in prose, which produces a strong hierarchy of the given information from the point of view of semantic and informational importance.

Semantics. The context in prose helps to narrow the possibilities and choose the correct meaning of a polysemantic word. Verse often leaves the reader doubting which meaning was actually intended.

Informational loading. Most important words in prose normally go to the end of a phonetic phrase, where the syntagmatic stress is realized. In verse, they intentionally are

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put into various positions within the line, including the beginning, so that a reader can not predict where to look for the main information.

All these mechanisms—parataxis, level intonation with no logical stresses, context, the hampering of clear understanding, the lack of predictable placement for informationally important words, and certain other linguistic devices—seem to be aimed at creating difficulties for comprehending the verse text.

Recent work of neurophysiologists has shown that ambiguities in the text (both lexical and semantic) may increase activity in the segments of the right hemisphere of the brain, which is associated with imaginative thinking. Thus, we suggest that the linguistic regularities found in verse have the function of activating imaginative thinking at the expense of logical thought.

Key words: verse study, linguistics of verse, verse syntax, verse and brain

Verse study has only quite recently become a branch of linguistic study, but it has already become clear that the strict and predictable structure of verse helps in investigating certain aspects of phonetics, syntax, and semantics that are less obvious when studying much less uniformly structured prosaic texts. It also helps to examine the influence of speech structure on brain activity, as the influence of verse on brain activity is very peculiar indeed.

What is a verse text? Though the difference between verse and prose may seem obvious, it is not yet clear which linguistic features are permanently present in verse and cannot disappear from it without turning it into prose. Meter, rhyme, stanzas, alliteration, syntactic parallelism and other features may be absent from a verse text, and it will still be verse. The only feature that is preserved in verse up to the very borderline with prose is the division into lines.

But what actually is a verse line? It is reasonable to assume that the main unit of verse should have certain positive features of its linguistic structure and a set of functions that make possible an impact upon the reader somehow differing from that of prose.

So what linguistic features of a verse line have been found so far and what are their functions in verse?

Syntax. There is a seemingly inconspicuous aspect of syntax that has been neglected for quite a while: syntactic ties may be closer or looser and thus give longer or shorter pauses between words. Automatically generated speech (with the exception of some of its most recent variants) is easily recognizable by the unnaturally even pauses between words. If you pick up the phone and a voice says “Vy zadolzhali za telefonnyj razgovor 200 rublej” (“You need to pay 200 rubles for the telephone call”) with even pauses between words, we obviously wouldn’t answer because we’ll know this is a machine speaking. It has even become a cliché in the movies: if Schwarzenegger is trying to show that he is a robot, cyborg or other mechanical or half-mechanical creature he will speak with even pauses between his words. This phenomenon has been studied by two very different branches of philology: automatic speech synthesis [Krivnova 1995; Krivnova 2017; Sander mann 1996; Briery 2011] and verse study. Following are the results obtained within verse study.

1) **Regularities in the distribution of close and loose syntactic ties within the line** are as follows. In prose each syntactic tie has its own type of distribution, which is determined by the normal word order of the given language (see Fig.4: the distribution of ties in English prosaic 4-word syntagms). In a verse line close and loose syntactic ties function as two groups opposed to one another. Close syntactic ties accumulate between the last two stressed words of the line. Their occurrence is also prominent between a line's first two metrically stressed words, while it is lowest in the middle of the line. The distribution of loose syntactic ties is exactly the opposite: they are found most frequently in

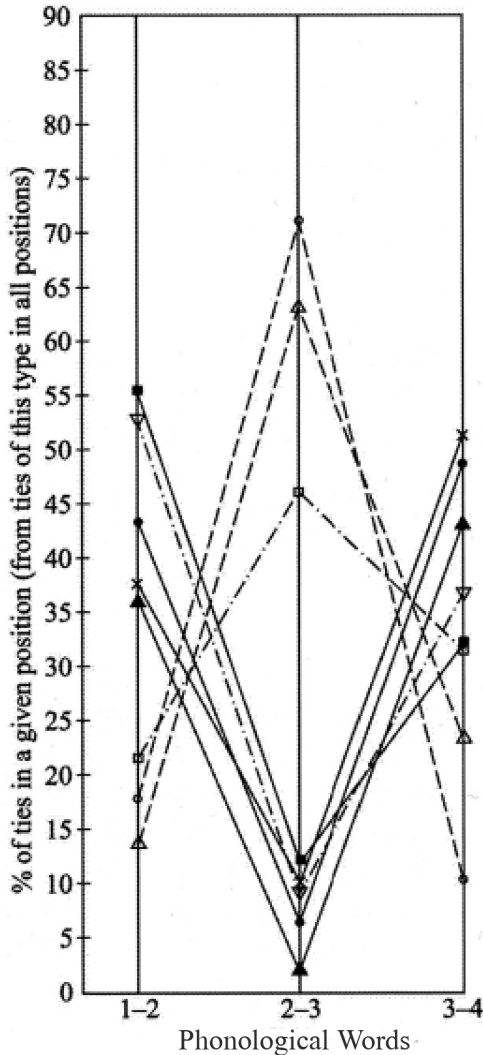


Figure 1. Distribution of closer and looser syntactic ties in a 4-word 10-syllable line of Voltaire

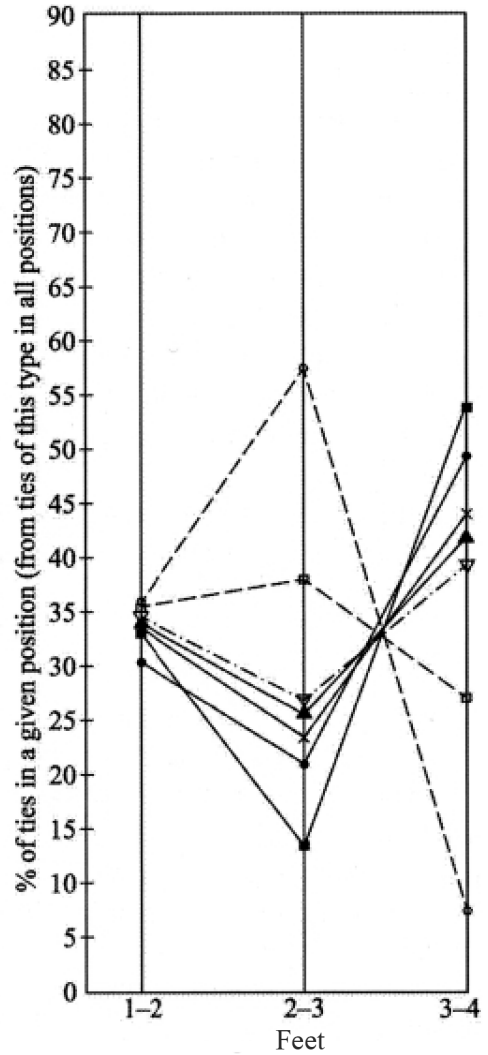


Figure 2. Distribution of closer and looser syntactic ties in fully stressed lines of iambic tetrameter of J. Swift

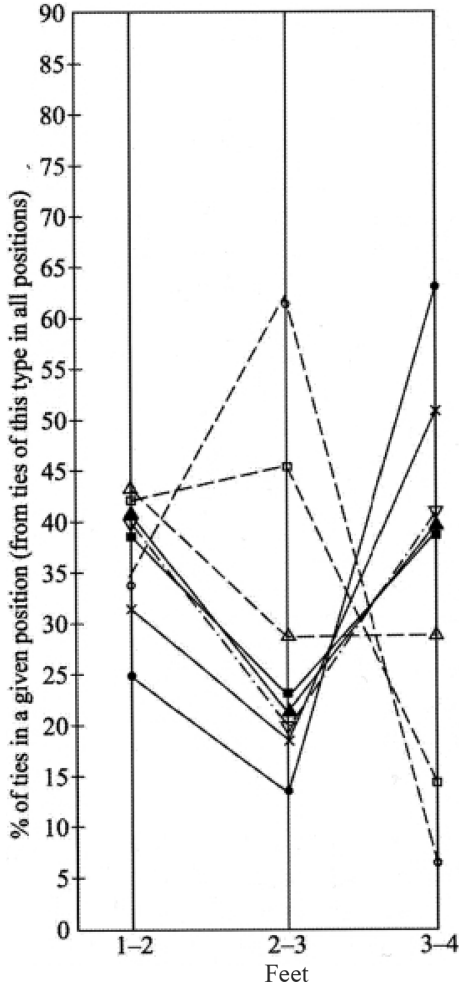


Figure 3. Distribution of closer and looser syntactic ties in fully stressed lines of the iambic tetrameter of A. Pushkin

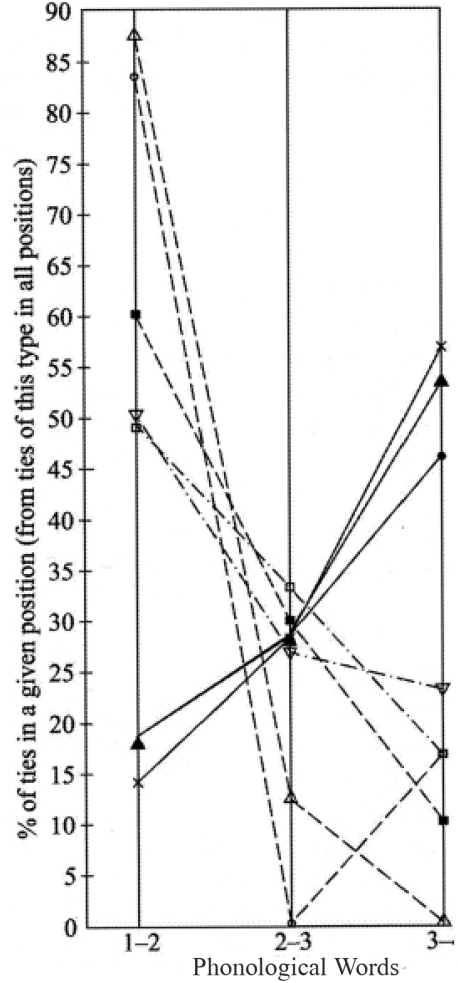


Figure 4. Distribution of closer and looser syntactic ties in 4-word non-fiction prose syntagms (recommendations for authors from English biological journals)

Symbols used in figures 1-4

Closer syntactic ties (full line):

- attributive tie
- tie of the direct object
- × tie of the indirect object
- ▲ tie of the adverbial modifier

Special types of tie (dot-and-dash line):

- ▽ predicative tie
- tie between homogeneous parts of the sentence

Looser syntactic ties (dashed line):

- △ tie introducing participle construction or adverbial participle construction
- tie between clauses of a complex sentence

the middle of the line and least frequently between the last words of the line (see Figures 1–3: distribution of ties in Voltaire’s four-word 10-syllable lines — Figure 1; in J.Swift’s iambic tetrameter — Figure 2; in A. S.Pushkin’s iambic tetrameter — Figure 3). This means that lines like, for example,

Of foreign aspect, and of tender age...

occur in verse more frequently, than:

Each trace wax’d fainter of his course, till all...

This distribution of syntactic ties, with closer ties near the borders of a line and looser ties in the middle, helps to meld words of a verse line into a single unit. Also, close syntactic ties near the borders of a line produce the contrast between the close connection of words near the borders of a line and loose syntactic ties between the lines.

The syntactic regularities in the distribution of close and loose syntactic ties have been found in different languages (English, Russian, French, Spanish), different systems of versification (syllabic, syllabic-accentual, accentual), different periods (XVIII–XX centuries), and different literary trends (Classicism, Romanticism, Acmeism, Futurism) [Gasparov 1981; Tarlinskaja 1984; Tarlinskaja 1987; Skulacheva 1989; Skulacheva 1990; Gasparov, Skulacheva 1992; Gasparov, Skulacheva 1993, Skulacheva 1996; Skulacheva 2014, Kruglova, Smirnova, Skulacheva 2017 in this volume]. On the history of the investigation of this phenomenon see [Akimova 2017 in this volume].

With verse study now starting to create automatic analysis of verse at all linguistic levels suitable for it, we are specifically interested in what kind of syntactic parser may suit this kind of analysis. The mechanism used in verse seems to be the same used for the division of oral prosaic speech into syntagms. Our data show that in prose the closeness of syntactic ties increases from the beginning towards the end of a syntagm. When it drops instead of increasing further, a border between syntagms occurs. Therefore this approach may be useful for segmenting oral speech into syntagms in the process of synthesizing oral speech. But let’s turn back to the syntactic regularities of verse structure.

2) The second regularity is that loose syntactic ties prevail between lines, especially in classical poetry. This tendency gradually weakens from the XVIII to the XX century [Шапир 2003], but even the most irregular modern verse with a high number of enjambements is perceived against the neutral norm, which is verse with loose ties between lines:

He turn’d within his solitary hall,
And his high shadow shot along the wall;
There were the painted forms of other times,
'Twas all they left of virtues or of crimes,
Save vague tradition; and the gloomy vaults
That hid their dust, their foibles, and their faults...

(G. G.Byron “Lara”)

This peculiarity reinforces the division into lines by putting a loose tie and consequently a long pause between lines. Strangely enough, strong enjambement in modern poetry serves the same purpose: a graphic break between lines that occurs within a closely connected syntactic construction also makes the division into lines more obvious.

3) **The ratio of coordination and subordination** is very different in verse and prose (see Tables 1, 2) [Skulacheva, Bujakova 2010a; reprinted in: Skulacheva, Bujakova 2009]. Clauses of complex sentences are coordinated rather than subordinated in verse, and subordinated rather than coordinated in prose. Why is this so? A number of linguistic phenomena (increase in coordination, intonation of enumeration, no strong logical stresses, no fixed place for the most semantically important words) help to present verse lines as units of equal psychological, semantic, and structural value. A considerable increase of coordination does this at the syntactic level. This phenomenon is especially notable in the position between lines and much less prominent in the rest of the text [Skulacheva, Bujakova 2010b], which means that its main function is to present lines as elements of more or less similar weight and value.

Table 1

% of coordination in verse and prose of Russian authors (XVII–XX centuries)

	Folklore	Simcon Polocky	Lomonosov	Zhukovsky	Pushkin.	Lermontov	Tyutchev	Fet	Kuzmin	Blok	Khlebnikov	Akhmatova	Tvardovsky	Brodsky.
VERSE % of all ties between clauses in verse	92,2	62,3	54,7	81,7	74,1	77,5	78,6	79,8	62,5	70,9	76,4	77,6	65,1	51,5
PROSE % of all ties between clauses in prose	68,4	46	22,8	62	36,3	57	28,6	30,6	40,5	42,8	46,7	36,4	32,6	29

Table 2

% of coordination in verse and prose of French authors (XVIII–XX centuries)

	Voltaire	Hugo	G.de Nerval	Baudelaire	Mallarmé	Verlaine	Valéry	Eluard
VERSE % of all ties between clauses in verse	71,7	73,7	73	57,8	39,2	57	54,5	76,5
PROSE % of all ties between clauses in prose	38,7	26,3	32,5	34,5	28,6	27	26,8	34

Tables 1 and 2 show that in all the Russian and French texts studied (27 000 sentences) the verse of every author is distinguished from his prose by an increased amount of coordination, and that normally the increase of coordination in verse is very considerable. This is typical of verse in different languages (Russian, French), different systems of versification (syllabic, syllabic-accentual, vers libre), and different periods (XVII–XX centuries and individual styles).

II. Intonation. Miroslav Chervenka suggested that there exists an invariant of verse line intonation. When a teacher at school tells a boy not to read verse as prose, he or she subconsciously presupposes the existence of such intonation. L. V. Zlatoustova's experiments have shown that the intonation of enumeration occurs in verse more frequently than in prose [Zlatoustova 1981: 76–79]. Our postgraduate A. E. Ereshko tried to find out which types of intonation occur in verse most often—sometimes even conflicting with the syntax of particular lines—and which occur only when the syntax strictly demands a certain intonation. The intonation that occurs in verse even in conflict with the demands of syntax is closest to the intonation associated with enumeration [Ereshko 1996]. It may occur even between predicate and indirect object, or between subject and predicate—that is, in positions where there is no syntactic reason for it. This intonation may well most closely resemble what Chervenka called the invariant of verse intonation.

This is the only illogical type of intonation: it enumerates homogeneous parts of speech and is automatically used when the text is not strictly logically organized (for example, when a priest enumerates those whom he is going to pray for during a church service). It appears more frequently in verse at the expense of the intonation of incompleteness—that is at the expense of the most logical type of intonation. One of the recent investigations of this phenomenon is represented in [Kostuyk 2017] in this volume.

As has been shown recently, the same intonation occurs in a prayer and in the speech of a person in altered state of consciousness [Yanko 2010].

III. Distribution of more and less informative words in the verse line and in prosaic phonetic syntagms. One possible approach is to compare the distribution of more and less informative, more and less semantically important words in verse lines and in prose syntagms. If somebody calls us on the phone and says “I arrive tomorrow at five o'clock” and we are unable to hear all the words, there will be a distinct hierarchy of words that we need to hear to be able to reconstruct the whole saying. If we hear “tomorrow at five” — there is no need to call back, if we hear “I” — we'll have almost no chance of reconstructing the sentence. This approach is different from theme and rheme, given and new, the contrastive focus approaches. We rank words in a four-word syntagm from 1 to 4 depending on which word (rank 1), which two words (rank 2), or which three words (rank 3) are most important for reconstructing the message. It turns out that in prose the most informative words occur close to the end of a syntagm (which is in keeping with phonetic data showing that syntagmatic stress normally occurs at the end of a syntagm). In verse the most informative words are spread much more evenly throughout the line—sometimes they accumulate closer to the beginning of a line— so that it is impossible to predict where exactly we should look for the most important word, because its probability of occurring in the different parts of a line is almost equal. This is consistent with the data obtained by phoneticians indicating that verse lines have a more even, monotonous intonation, with a more level fundamental frequency and without obvious logical stresses. It seems that all the linguistic peculiarities of a line serve the same purpose: to present verse lines as segments of more or less equal prominence and weight irrespective of their real semantic and logical prominence.

IV. Perception of verse semantics. Here we come to one of the most important problems, which we need to deal with if we are to understand the difference between verse and prose: why should verse be divided into lines, what is the function of this segmentation?

This is a most fascinating problem — and also most difficult to describe in precise linguistic terms. It is clear that all the above-described mechanisms, which are typical of verse and disappear in prose, are aimed at producing a peculiar type of impact upon the reader. Ju. Tynyanov spoke of “the deformation of sense by rhythm” in poetry, but even almost a century later we do not possess linguistic tools capable of describing this phenomenon. Still even the early experiments show that verse form leads to unusual changes in our perception of the logic and semantics of a text. Our student, Vadim Kimmelman [Kimmelman 2012] has compared the perception of blatant logical deviations in verse and in prose. Texts in both verse and prose with a serious mistake (such as: “he has three swords”, and after a colon two swords are enumerated) were given to groups of informants, and their likelihood of noticing the error was studied. The difference between the groups reading a verse text and those reading its prosaic equivalent was obvious. Those who read prose mentioned the deviation from logic immediately and were not happy about it; those who read a verse text either did not mention the mistake at all, or felt that it was quite normal for a verse text.

My favourite example, which was tested on a great number of young audiences not familiar with what it describes, is a poem for children by A. Barto that is universally known by all Russians. It is normally one of the first poems a Russian child gets acquainted with:

БЫЧОК

Идет бычок, качается,
Вздыхает на ходу:
— Ох, доска кончается,
Сейчас я упаду!
(The calf is walking along the plank, wagging
And sighs while walking:
— The plank is almost over,
I’ll be falling in a minute)

My translation lacks proper verse structure, so an English-speaking reader will be nonplussed by the almost entirely illogical nature of the text. But all Russian readers who come across its verse equivalent are usually satisfied and have the sense they have fully understood the text. A curious thing always happened when I retold the text in prose to an audience and asked what exactly happened to the calf and why did it behave in such an unnatural way: it clearly knew that it would fall because it was coming to the end of the plank, yet it still kept walking. The majority of people of whatever age were surprised that they did not know. And the very notion that they did not understand occurred to them only when they heard the text in prose. Their explanations varied. The calf was depressed: it knew it would be falling but didn’t care. Another explanation,

Soviet in nature: the calf knew that it was supposed to fall, but it had a sense of duty so kept walking. Even illustrations of books by A. Barto showed that the artist did not understand the text but was fully satisfied with his completely illogical notion of what was happening: often the picture in a book would show a board or a plank horizontally hanging over a water surface, like one half of a bridge ending over the middle of a river, and the calf which would have to fall in the water as soon as it reached the end of the plank. In reality A. Barto was describing a toy popular in Russia at that time: a wooden calf with hinged legs walking along an inclined plank under the effect of gravitation and falling at the end of it. But we are interested not in the fact that a certain object disappears from everyday life, which is rather common, but in the fact that it makes the text fully unintelligible and truly strange, which is easily noticed in prose but remains unnoticed in verse.

Why does the division into lines influence the perception of a text in this way?

Other means of hindering comprehension in verse. Context in verse does not always assist in selecting the only correct meaning of a word. Sometimes it works in precisely the opposite way, adding potential interpretations without helping to choose the only one possible. As was shown by N. N. Pertsova [1988], context in verse is often structured in such a way that a few meanings are realized simultaneously in the same word, and the reader is supposed to see several possible meanings of a word simultaneously.

Moreover, a poet may do even more to make choosing one possible interpretation more difficult.

For example, M. Kuzmin in his poem “Trazimenskie trostniki” (“Trazimen reeds”) describes one object as a sea, a lake and a river within a rather short text, and hints at a classical myth as if it is common knowledge — a myth, which according to one of the best experts on classical philology, M. L. Gasparov, has never existed.

Still the reader remains perfectly satisfied by the level of his understanding — a situation impossible in prose.

Verse apprehension. An experiment has been conducted to find out to what extent and how easily logical inconveniences are observed in verse and in prose texts. As we have already mentioned above, in prose all informants noticed a mistake immediately; in verse the informants were fully satisfied by their understanding of the text without seeing anything wrong with it [Kimmelman 2012]. The absence of critical thinking may be one of the characteristics of the altered states of consciousness as described by psychologists.

A group of scientists from Carnegie Mellon University [Mason et al 2007; Mitchell et al 2008], who dealt with lexical ambiguity, and a group of scientists from a number of British Universities [Thierry et al. 2010, Keidel et al. 2013; see also useful information on verse and brain study in M. Falikman’s article in the given issue of the journal] have shown that when a person encounters an unclear portion of a text the configuration of active brain segments changes and the segments in the right hemisphere are activated. Therefore it seems possible that linguistic mechanisms are working as triggers for changing the configuration of active brain segments. For the reader every word still means the same thing as in prose, but the meaning of the text as a whole changes in a very peculiar

way: verse may be perceived differently, because the organization at all linguistic levels is less easily perceptible (coordination increased at the expense of subordination, a monotonous intonation close to that of enumeration, important words randomly scattered across various positions in the verse line, more than one meaning expressed within the same word, deliberate “illogicality” of the text). Moreover, our recent experiments make us believe that we may be approaching the basic difference between logical and imaginative thinking — the two main types of how the brain can work with acquired information — and that we may be observing the mechanisms for activating imaginative thinking at the expense of logical. Closer work with professional physiologists and psychologists, which we are starting to undertake, should provide a clearer picture of how the observed linguistic characteristics of verse function.

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