

Prosodic planning and linguistic interference: a case in poetic metrics

Boris Pasternak and the Georgians

Author: **Alessandra Piatti**

✉ alessandra.piatti@gmail.com

1 Introduction

This study analyzes a specific case of prosodic planning and transfer, concerning the peculiar context of metrical devices in poetry.

Boris Pasternak (1890 – 1960), one of the most prominent XX century Russian authors, dealt with poetic translation as well. Starting from 1933, he translated Georgian poetry. What is interesting from the point of view of prosodic planning is that when Pasternak started this activity, some relevant changes were immediately noticeable in his own poetic production. This study aims at proposing some instruments to clarify how could the perceived L2 rhythm interact with the prosodic characteristics of the author's mother tongue.

2 Pasternak's translations from Georgian poetry

At the time when Pasternak got in touch with Georgian poetry, translating into Russian the works of national literatures of the peoples of Soviet Union was marked by a political meaning, since the Kremlin considered it as a necessary condition to create a unitary Soviet literature and cultural identity. It goes without saying that a fundamental step for the sovietization of national masterpieces was their prior adaptation to Russian aesthetic canons and taste.

However, Boris Pasternak had been dealing with poetic translation since his début as a poet in the 1910's. Moreover, he felt deeply bound to Georgia as a consequence of his close friendship with the Georgian poets Paolo Jašvili, T'ician T'abidze and, later, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Čikovani and other representatives of Georgian culture. Pasternak travelled to Georgia four times: in 1931, 1933, 1945 and 1959. He got in touch not only with contemporary Georgian poetry, but also with XIX tradition, in particular with the work of Nik'oloz Baratašvili, Ak'ak'i C'ereteli and Važa Pšavela.

When he started to translate Georgian poetry, Pasternak had only a very basic knowledge of the language, but some collaborators prepared for him word-to-word translations which he set into Russian verses. A skilled musician, he could rely as well on his acute musical sensibility and, as a rule, asked his collaborators to endow their preliminary translations with a phonetic transcription of the Georgian text and notes on the original rhythmic structure. Moreover, Pasternak could listen to his friends poets performing readings of their own works. Although Russian and Georgian poetic metrics follow quite different principles, this attitude shows the poet's interest in preserving not only the semantic features, but also the prosodic characteristics of the original text, recreating the perceived Georgian rhythm by the means of the Russian language.

3 Rhythm and meter in Georgian and Russian poetry

Russian poetry follows a syllabotonic system, where rhythm is determined by a regular alternation of tonic and atonic syllables, while in Georgian poetry many different factors such as isosyllabism, beat/off-beat alternation and duration participate in determining rhythm. A peculiarity of Georgian poetical prosody is a general observed correspondence between phonological and semantic units, that is, one foot or a couple of feet often corresponds to one word.

For example, a characteristic scheme for a quatrain by a Georgian poet could be:

- - - - - - - - - - - -	Mírbiš, mímáprens úgo úk'vlod čémi Mérani
- - - - - - - - - - - -	Úk'an mómčxvis tvalbediti šávi q'órani!
- - - - - - - - - - - -	Gásc'i, Mérano, šens č'énebas ár akvs sámzghvari,
- - - - - - - - - - - - -	Dá niavs mic píkri čémi, šávad mghélvari!
	[Nik'oloz Baratašvili, <i>Merani</i> , 1845]

Like in every rhythmic structure, a form of symmetry and regularity is here respected. It would be perhaps a drastic simplification, but one could easily affirm that symmetry and regularity in Georgian poetry are obtained through variety and alternation, while in Russian poetry the same target is reached through uniformity and repetition. In Russian metrics the phonological and semantic systems are usually independent from one another, i.e. there is no exact correspondence between foot and word organization. Some of the most common Russian stanzas would then sound like:

- - - - - - - -	Moj djá dja sá mych čé stnych prá vil,
- - - - - - - -	Kogdá ne v šút ku za nemóg
- - - - - - - -	On u važát' sebjá zastá vil
- - - - - - - -	I lúč' še vý dumat' ne móg
	[Aleksandr Puškin, <i>Evgenij Onegin</i> , 1823-1831]

This is just an abstract representation, since in Russian the rate between tonic and atonic syllables is 1:1.8. The 1:1 rate implied by a binary rhythm would be too far from the natural characteristics of the language, so that in a iambic tetrameter the strong position in one or two feet is usually not realized and the iamb (- _) is in such cases substituted by a pyrrhic (- -). On the other hand, in ternary rhythms the 1:2 rate would be slightly high, that is why in some cases can occur spondees (_ _), or an atonic syllable can be dropped off.

4 Modifications in late Pasternak's verse structure

When hearing his friends reading Georgian verses, Pasternak should have been impressed at most by those characteristics that he couldn't find in his own mother tongue nor in languages with which he was more familiar. The most noticeable of them was the frequent speed changes due to the stressing of strong positions in the verse by a prolonged syllable duration. This characteristic gets a peculiar emphasis in poetic reading.

To recreate this kind of speed changes in his mother tongue, Pasternak found two stylistic devices: a frequent use of tribrach among ternary meters and a kind of verse organization that, within the traditional rules of Russian metrics, can remind the word-foot correspondence observed in the Georgian poetry.

4.1 Tribrach

One of the most evident peculiarities of Pasternak's verse structure is observed precisely in ternary measures, where the expected 1:2 rate becomes even more critical for natural Russian prosody, since one accent is sometimes not realized: a dactyl (_ - -), an amphibrach (- _ -) or an anapaest (- - _) is substituted by a tribrach (- - -). This stylistically marked phenomenon occurs on average once every 58 ternary feet in Pasternak's work prior to his translations from Georgian poetry. After 1933, the average rate passes immediately from 1:58 to 1:31. The new rate is kept constant in every single poetic collection following the poet's translations from the Georgians. In translated lyrical poetry itself, the average occurrence of the tribrach is even more frequent (1:25 ca).

It is remarkable that Pasternak avoided rhythmical forms foreign to Russian poetic canons, which would have been perceived as mere exoticism or experimentalism and soon forgotten. On the contrary, he introduced some relevant and permanent changes in the Russian tradition, adapting classical meters to produce new rhythms. For that reason, the usage of such new forms was not limited to Pasternak's translations, but passed very soon to his original poetry and were borrowed by younger poets as well. To a Georgian structure like, for instance, the one of the following verse from Baratašvili's *Rame q'abaxzed* [*Night on mount Kazbek*] (1836):

- | - | - - | - | - - | - | - - | - | - - | p'írad | p'íradad || seírnobden || k'ék'luc | mósilni ||

then, in Pasternak's translation corresponds an anapaestic tetrameter with a tribrach in the third position:

- - | - | - - | - - | - - | - - | - - | - - | S narjádny | mi dévu | škami tam || i sjám ||

The author's concern was not the one of merely reproducing the sequence of beats and off-beats of the original verse, but the one of combining traditional syllable-accent rules with the quantity principle he perceived as the main constituent of Georgian poetic prosody. A tribrach produces then a noticeable speed change in verse rhythm.

4.2 Towards word-foot correspondence

Pasternak based the rhythm of some of his late verses not merely on a beat/off-beat counterpoint, but also on syllable quantity and duration. This purpose was achieved through the same formal means the author observed in Georgian poetry, that is, the articulation of verses on a grouping criterion based on lexical units, which substitute the traditional syllable scansion.

The refrain verse of Pasternak's late poem *Sneg idet* [*Snow is falling*] (1956), for instance, can be articulated both following the syllabic criterion and lexical one.

In the first case we would have a central caesura and two metrical pauses (x): the resulting structure would be tolerated by Russian metrics, but its realization would look on the whole quite tortuous:

sneg	i	det	(x)	sneg	i	det	(x)
------	---	-----	-----	------	---	-----	-----

In a word-foot scansion, the two metrical pauses would be compensated by dedicating to the word *sneg* the duration of the whole foot. In this case, the beat/off-beat counterpoint is substituted by a duration alternance, from which results as well a meaningful syntactic (object-verb) counterpoint.

Although this would be an exception to Russian metric rules, one should bear in mind that the reported verse constitutes a refrain in the poem, so that it occupies a position where even a drastic change in rhythm would be easily accepted and appreciated by a listener or reader.

If we look forth, we would notice how, after the refrain, the rhythm immediately recovers the traditional accentual-syllabic scansion:

sneg	i	det	sneg	i	det		
slo	vno	pa	da	jut	ne	chlo	pja

5 Objective measure vs subjective perception

The two main schools of thought in poetic metrics consist in an approach which mainly focus on the objective, acoustic characteristics of the analysed verses, and in a more subjectivist point of view, which principally concerns the psychological organization of the acoustic perception operated by the listener.

The approach of the objectivists shows some evident lacks, since it ignores that the acoustic, physically measurable properties of poetic verses are themselves the result of the reader's subjective perception of their rhythmical structure and of his own planning of the consequent reading performance.

Since the first years of XX century it has been observed that absolute periodicity is not essential nor sufficient to produce rhythm, since the mind tends to organize the bewildering natural stimuli into regular structures. A study of 2007 by M. Jongsma, E. Meeuwissen, P. Vos and R. Maens in the field of musical rhythm has shown that trained listeners can perceive a rhythm change in the range of 2%, while poor responders could identify a rhythm change of at least 10%. These results, anyway, concern a permanent change in a regular rhythm, after which starts a new regular phase, while in the case of the perception of rhythmic regularity in poetry we face continuous variations.

In the far 1901, J. E. Wallin noted that a 15% variation in the time between two metrical stresses, independently on the number of atonic syllables in the interval, is only slightly perceived by listeners, while with a 12% variation the whole structure is perceived as regular and with 7% variation listeners perceive a kind of ostinato rhythm. A bit more recently, in 1973, P. Boomsliiter, G. Hastings and W. Creel studied the differences between individual and choral poetic reading performances, finding that the standard variation of the duration of internal pattern segments, both in poetry that scans by syllable and in poetry that does not, swung from 19% in individual readings to 10% in collective performances (from 24% to 14% in non-metric examples).

While the subjectivists are fundamentally right when affirming that the mind needs measure in order to have data usable by perception and memory, and that a perceiver will try to impose a system on the incoming signal, it would be misleading to ignore the effects of physical signals on the psychic response of a perceiving subject. Although the perceiver has an active role in determining the rhythmic pattern of an impulse, the material essence of rhythmic beats deeply influences his experience and preference criteria in grouping physical impulses into regular patterns.

6 An interpretation of Pasternak's case

Prosodic planning in poetry could seem to be a more conscious process than in common speech, since it produces more regular effects. Anyway, precisely this regularity can be connected to natural automatisms in human physiology and psychology.

The regular rhythm of language is the result of both the psychological preference for regular patterns and the physiological tendency to economize muscular movements through regular repetitions. On the other hand, since antiquity poetry is related to the unconscious sphere through rhythmic experience. According to Socrates' opinion reported by Plato (*Ion*: 530-542), good poets would draw their verses from rhythm and harmony, while possessed by such entities: it is perhaps the most ancient prosody-first hypothesis ever traced, though not within a prosodic theory. The mentioned study by Boomsliiter, Hastings and Creel shows how the standard variation in a rhythmical pattern decreases in choral reading performances, where the automatic factors become prominent.

What is obvious is that prosodic changes in Pasternak's work could not be fully conscious: it is unthinkable that the poet sat in front of a page with his own verses, calculating when and where to use a tribrach in order to keep the 1:31 rate. On the other hand, it is verisimilar that the passage to a word-foot structure in some refrains was the result of a conscious choice.

In the presented case of linguistic interference, two parallel phenomena can be identified:

- **Prosodic transfer from L1 to L2**
When Pasternak heard his friend reading Georgian poetry, he formulated his own interpretative hypothesis of the new meters he listened to. The first step on Pasternak's path to the acquisition of Georgian rhythms was the one of interpreting them through the means the poet had in his hands until then. In this phase, the author reduced the perceived L2 phonological characteristics to L1 categories.

- **Prosodic transfer from L2 to L1**
The new characteristics Pasternak perceived in Georgian metrics enriched his repertory of rhythmic patterns. If in general a phonetic change in a language is due to a change in the speakers' articulatory habits, something similar should have happened on the prosodic level within Pasternak's own idiolect. The change in Pasternak's planning habits results from a variation in his listening habits, as the new rhythmic patterns passed from the domain of listening to the one of prosodic planning in verse production. This phenomenon can also be described as a peculiar case of interaction between perception and action, leading to prosodic hybridism.

While in general L1-L2 transfer is a well known and widely studied topic, the parallel phenomenon of L2-L1 transfer has been often ignored, though it is as interesting as the first case and at least twice as curious. Further studies could more deeply analyse the main steps of such a passage from the domain of perception to the one of action and, in a wider perspective, could investigate L2-L1 prosodic transfer both in this specific frame and in more prosaic cases.