

Translated Verse between Experiment and Tradition (Russian Three-Ictus Dolnik in Translations from Heine)

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Abstract

The article presents the recent findings in rhythmic features of translations made in Russian dolnik (accentual verse with mono- and disyllabic inter-ictic intervals). Although historically this meter was influenced by translations of German dolniks, in Russian tradition it is rooted in ternary meters and avoids binary (iambic/trochaic) cadence. However, in the case of translations, these tendencies of Russian original dolnik could have been altered for the sake of reproducing the source texts' rhythm. The classic examples are Alexander Blok's equirhythmic translations from Heine, which are drastically different from the rhythm of Blok's original dolnik in the proportion of lines with binary rhythm. I investigated the two strategies that prevailed in translations made in dolnik during the 20th century: the equirhythmic method that presumes the usage of dolnik to reproduce the original rhythm, or the non-equirhythmic method that adapted the meter to its rhythmic norms in the target language. Examination of translations from Heine proved that the equirhythmic tradition started by Blok in the early 20th century was quite unstable. In the second half of the century, translators switched to the non-equirhythmic type, abandoning binary lines and showing a strong preference for "pure" dolnik lines with irregular unstressed intervals. While earlier equirhythmic translations clearly demonstrate the possibility of reproducing the rhythm of German dolnik in Russian, this switch to the rhythms of Russian dolnik in the later translations provides strong evidence for the cultural reasons to avoid lines with binary and even ternary rhythm in this meter in Russian poetry. Examples confirmed that even in the free domain of translation, Russian dolnik was a stabilising force and functioned as if it was a new classical meter.

1 Introduction¹

During the late 19th century and at the turn of the 20th, Russian poetry underwent a profound verse revolution: owing to the efforts of the symbolist poets Zinaida Gippius, Valery Bryusov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and above all, Alexander

¹ This article is based on a study first presented at the Plotting Poetry 5 conference; an expanded and revised version was later published in [Polilova 2024a](#) (see also [Polilova 2024b](#)).

Blok, the basic Russian metrical repertoire expanded to include the so-called *dolnik*, or strict stress-meter (Kolmogorov and Proxorov 1964; Gasparov 1968, 1974; Tarlinskaja 1993). By the 1930s, it turned into the sixth classic Russian meter, adding to the five traditional accentual-syllabic meters: iambs, trochees, amphibrachs, dactyls, and anapests (Gasparov 2000, p. 270).

The backstory of this type of verse in Russian poetry is a series of attempts to recreate or imitate German four- and three-beats meters, mainly in translations and adaptations from Goethe, Schiller, and Heine (Bailey 1969, pp. 1–6; Abisheva 1975). Becoming more and more popular, *dolnik* passed through rhythmic transformations over the following decades. Prominent scholars analysed this process (Kolmogorov and Proxorov 1964; Gasparov 1968, 1974; etc.), highlighting both general and individual rhythmic peculiarities in the *dolnik* development and comparing its structure to that of the European accentual and strict-stress verse (Tarlinskaja 1992, 1993; M. Lotman 2015). At the same time, almost beyond the specialists' attention, there is an extensive corpus of Russian translated 20th-century *dolnik*, used as a rhythmic analogue of European accentual and syllabic meters, most notably for rendering the German strict-stress meter and Knittelvers, and the Spanish octosyllable.

The only exception is Alexander Blok's and Viktor Kolomijcev's translations from Heine explored by James Bailey in his outstanding article "Blok and Heine: An Episode from the History of Russian *dol'niki*" (1969), which we will discuss below. First, a few definitions and statistics.

2 The Accentual and Syllabic Principle of the Russian *Dolnik*

Central to the very notion of Russian *dolnik* are the features of syllabic and accentual regularity. Generally speaking, the *dolnik* has features of both accentual-syllabic and accentual verse. As Marina Tarlinskaja points out: "The relative syllabic and accentual regularity of structure makes it possible to identify potentially-stressed ('ictic') and potentially-unstressed ('non-ictic') syllabic positions, and to abstract the *dolnik* verse pattern in the form of a scheme, as with the iamb or the anapaest. However, unlike accentual-syllabic binary and ternary meters, the number of syllables in the non-ictic positions of the *dolnik* line, both before the first ictus (anacrusis) and between ictuses (inter-ictic intervals), is variable. The anacrusis can be 0, 1, or 2 syllables, and the inter-ictic intervals 1 or 2 syllables. The variable syllabic size of non-ictic positions blurs the structure of lines and moves the *dolnik* closer to purely accentual (tonic) verse, in which only actual stresses are a reality and the unstressed intervals vary within a wide range" (1993, p. 192).

Lines such as [Example 1](#) and [Example 2](#) illustrate the structure of the Russian three-ictic *dolnik*. The second column shows the rhythmic pattern, and the third column the order of the unstressed intervals.

This structure of this verse form can be presented using the following scheme or formula:

$$(0/1/2) \times (1/2) \times (1/2) \times (0/1/2/3)$$

Vxozhù ya v tèmnye xràmy,	(x)XxXxxX(x)	1×2
Sovershàyu bèdnyj obryàd.	(xx)XxXxxX	1×2
Tam zhdù ya Prekràsnoj Dàmy	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	2×1
V mercàn'ì kràsnyx lampàd.	(x)XxXxxX(x)	1×2
V tenì u vysòkoj kolònny	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	2×2
Drozhù ot skripa dverèj.	(x)XxXxxX(x)	1-2
A v licò mne glyadit, ozarènnij,	(xx)XxxXxxX(x)	2-2
Tol'ko òbraz, lish' sòn o Nèj <...>	(xx)XxxXxxX(x)	2-1

Example 1: Alexandr Blok. “Vxozhu ja v temnye xramy...”, 25/10/1902

A tepèr' by domòj skorèe	(xx)XxxXxxX(x)	2×1
Kamerònovoj Galerèej	(xx)XxxxxX(x)	4
V ledyanòj tainstvennyj sàd,	(xx)XxXxxX	1×2
Gde bezmòlvstvuyut vodopàdy,	(xx)XxxxxX(x)	4
Gde vse dèvyat' mne bùdut ràdy,	(xx)XxxXxxX(x)	2×1
Kak byvàl ty kogdà-to ràd.	(xx)XxxXxxX	2×1

Example 2: Anna Akhmatova. “Poema bez geroya”, 1940–1962

Here × denotes ictuses (“strong” positions), numbers denote syllables in metrically unstressed (“weak”) inter-ictic positions, anacruses and clausulae, and variable intervals are divided by slashes and bracketed. Anacrusis can vary from 0–2 syllables, that is, the beginning of the verse can be dactylic, amphibrachic, or even anapaestic, 1–2 syllables can be put between the strong positions, and the end of the line can be masculine, feminine, or even (hyper-)dactylic.

Using this formula, one could conclude that there are only four variations of the three-ictic dolnik line when anacrusis and clausula alternations are not taken into account: SwwSwwS, SwSwwS, SwwSwS, SwSwS. In fact, the number of rhythmic realisations increases thanks to the patterns that omit the metrical stress. Not all the downbeats are actually stressed; like an accentual-syllabic line, a dolnik line can skip schematic stresses. See the second and fourth lines from [Example 2: Kamerònovoj Galerèej](#) and *Gde bezmòlvstvuyut vodopàdy*. They both contain an unstressed interval whose magnitude is greater than two syllables, with only two strong positions accentuated.

Assuming the possibility of skipping the schematic stresses on the first and second ictus (the last ictus is a constant), we get ten possible rhythmic patterns, as described by Gasparov (1968, pp. 67–70, 1974, pp. 223–225; [Liapin and Pilshchikov 2015](#), p. 61), who suggested reducing them to five most common basic forms:

I. (0/1/2) × 2 × 2 × (0/1/2/3)	(x)XxxXxxX(x)
II. (0/1/2) × 1 × 2 × (0/1/2/3)	(x)XxXxxX(x)

Form number	Rhythmic scheme	Unstressed Intervals	1890-1910	1910-1920	1920-1930	1930-1940	1940-1950	1950-1960	Total
I	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	2×2	33.9%	22.7%	26.9%	19.0%	16.5%	11.1%	18.9%
II	(x)XxXxxX(x)	1×2	31.9%	22.7%	16.9%	13.7%	12.9%	13.7%	14.5%
III	(x)XxxXxX(x)	2×1	27.5%	42.7%	46.1%	45.2%	51.4%	52.5%	47.8%
IV	(x)XxXxX(x)	1×1	3.7%	2.4%	1.7%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%	1%
V	(x)XxxxxX(0)	4	1.2%	6.1%	11.4%	20.7%	18.0%	21.6%	16.3%
Others			1.8%	3.4%	3.0%	0.9%	0.9%	0.7%	1.5%

Table 1: The preferred forms of the Russian three-ictus dolnik (Gaspárov 1974, p. 225, table 3)

III. $(0/1/2) \times 2 \times 1 \times (0/1/2/3)$	(x)XxxXxX(x)
IV. $(0/1/2) \times 1 \times 1 \times (0/1/2/3)$	(x)XxXxX(x)
V. $(0/1/2) \times 4 \times (0/1/2/3)$	(x)XxxxxX(x)

Form V is very peculiar, with a virtual (or movable) unstressed ictus or a prolonged inter-ictic interval as an “equivalent of stress”. Forms II and III would turn into form V if their second ictus were not stressed. As Liapin and Pilshchikov pointed out, “in Form V, the syllabic factor prevails over the tonic factor” (Liapin and Pilshchikov 2015, p. 61).

The forms with a skipped stress are divided into two groups: those in which the place of the ictus is not in doubt and those in which it is uncertain (as in form V). Here are possible correspondences:

XxxxxxX	2×2
XxxxxX	1×2 / 2×1
XxxxX	1×1
xxxXxxX	2×2 / 1×2
xxxXxX	2×1 / 1×1
xxxxxX	1×2 / 2×1 / 1×1

Variations with an omitted stress, other than form V ($(0/1/2) \times 4 \times (0/1/2/3)$), are scarce. In poems with a constant anacrusis, doubts concerning the first ictus can be resolved; in other cases, it is impossible. This is important when estimating the proportion of binary, ternary, and dolnik lines (i.e., lines with irregular— 1×2 / 2×1 —unstressed intervals or four-syllable unstressed intervals) in the text. For these latter patterns xxxXxxX, xxxXxX, xxxxxX, there is no way to determine their binary, ternary, or ‘pure’ dolnik rhythm, so they should be considered separately in the rhythmic analysis.

For further discussion I must underline that the most crucial rhythmic feature of the Russian dolnik is a negligible number of binary lines. It is only natural that Example 1 and Example 2 do not have iambic or trochaic rhythmic variations. Table 1 reveals the percentage of rhythmic forms from the 1890s to 1960s.

The main trends are the following:

1. a gradual decrease in the proportion of ternary lines

2. almost complete disappearance of the unpopular binary lines
3. preference of *dolnik* form III (2×1) over form II (1×2)

Poets favour form III (2-1), whose popularity is counterbalanced by form V.

Let us return to the article mentioned above by J. Bailey, who unveiled the fact that Blok's original *dolnik* and his *dolnik* translations from Heine (1909) showed drastic differences in the proportion of lines with binary rhythm. Viktor Kolomijcev's translations (1919–1921) show similar rhythmic tendencies (Bailey 1969, p. 12). In other words, Bailey demonstrated that an equirhythmic rendering of Heine's verse is possible in Russian, and at least two translators succeeded in copying the prosody of the German source poems.

Bailey concludes his work with the words: "How much Blok's stringent demands for rhythmical exactness have affected later translations of Heine and how common *dol'niki* on a binary basis have become in Russian poetry are open questions" (Bailey 1969, p. 16)². In the past half-century, no one has tried to answer this and so it became the starting point of this study.

This article is only a first, brief overview of the rhythmic evolution that the three-ictus *dolnik*, used in Russian poetic translations of the 20th century, has undergone. The material consists of poetic translations from Heine composed from 1909 to the 1990s and included in the edition (Gejne 2003).

3 Equirhythmic and Non-Equirhythmic Russian Translations from Heine

When discussing the correspondences between the verse structure of the original and translated texts, I use the concepts of equimetricity, equirhythmicity, and equiprosodicity (the term "equiprosodic translation" was suggested by M.-K. Lotman 2012), which are accepted in the research literature. Each indicates which level of the source text structure the translator conveys: the prosodic, the metrical, the rhythmic, or all of them simultaneously. Within a single language, the prosodic system, meter, and rhythm of the text generally correlate hierarchically, but in the process of rendering the original to another language, they can conflict. This means that translation can be equimetrical but non-equirhythmic, equirhythmic but non-equimetrical, and equimetrical but non-equiprosodic. All the translations from Heine discussed below are equiprosodic and equimetrical but differ regarding rhythm rendering.

I explored the rhythmic structure of verse translations from Heine by seven Russian translators: Alexander Blok (1880–1921), Wilhelm Sorgenfrei (1882–1938), Samuil Marshak (1887–1964), Wilhelm Levik (1906–1982), Greinem Ratgauz (1934–2011), Vladimir Levansky (1942–2010), Vladimir Letuchy (1943–2015). The corpus composed of all the translations in homogeneous three-ictus

² Kolomijcev's translations, while generally preserving the features of Blok's translations, show some individual differences. The same bipartite structure emerges, although it is somewhat weaker, the amount of ternary forming variations has risen at the expense of the binary and *dol'niki* forming variations... (Bailey 1969, p. 13).

dolnik³ presented in the edition (Gejne 2003).⁴ It contains 520 lines, 30 translations (the Appendix gives a list of texts examined with the number of lines in each and the original German title). Although the number of lines is small, it is enough to demonstrate how the rhythmic strategies of the translators differ. In order to categorise rhythmic patterns, I have followed the conventions set forth in the previous section of this article.

Table 2 and Table 3 show the share of rhythmic patterns in different translators and summarise the results obtained. These data confirm what has already been stated about Blok's translations and his own dolniks with their almost total lack of binary variations. According to Gasparov's calculations, the number of binary lines in Blok's dolniks does not exceed 1.3% (Gasparov 1974, p. 238, table 14), but his translations from Heine have a third of such lines. In his translations, Blok preserves the rhythmic features of Heine's verse with extraordinary precision (see Figure 1): they provide a striking example of interlingual rhythmic copying, where not only the variety of rhythmic types but also their relative proportions in the translation faithfully render the original text. Blok achieves this rhythmic precision by keeping a close eye on Heine's rhythmic variations following the rhythmic changes of the original line by line:

Die Jahre kommen und gehen,	xXxXxxXx	xxXxXxxXx	Plemenà ùxodyat v mogilu,
Geschlechter steigen ins Grab,	xXxXxxX	xXxXxxX	Idùt, proxòdyat godà,
Doch nimmer vergeht die Liebe,	xXxxXxXx	xXxxXxXx	I tòl'ko lyubòv' ne vỳrvat'
Die ich im Herzen hab.	xXxXxX	xXxxxX	Iz sèrdca nikogdà.
Nur einmal noch möcht ich dich sehen,	xXxxXxxXx	xxXxxXxxXx	Tol'ko ràz by tebyà mne uvidet'
Und sinken vor dir aufs Knie,	xXxXxxX	xXxxXxX	Sklonit'sya k tvoim nogàm,
Und sterbend zu dir sprechen:	xXxXxX	xXxXxxXx	Skazàt' tebè, umiràya:
"Madame, ich liebe Sie!"	xXxXxX	xXxXxX	Ya vàs lyublyù, madàm!

No other translator of Heine demonstrates such formal rhythmic accuracy.

Other translators of the first half of the century, such as Sorgenfrei, Marshak and Levik (as well as Heine's translators not represented in our corpus: Mikhail Kuzmin, Lev Penkovsky, Tamara Silman) also try to copy the original sound of the German verse, preserving a high number of binary lines. However, they generally fail (or do not attempt) to render the original balance of line types and intervals. Thus, Sorgenfrei and Levik use too many ternary lines, and Marshak uses too few dolnik lines. Nevertheless, their translations, like Blok's examples, are worth classifying as equirhythmic.

In the second half of the century, translations by Ratgauz, Levansky, and Letuchy, despite their individual rhythmic peculiarities, present a very different strategy. In Levansky and Letuchy, the proportion of binary lines is also noticeably higher than in the common Russian dolnik. However, the dominant

³ Texts with alternating four-ictic lines and three-ictic lines were excluded from consideration.

⁴ As a minimum number of lines per translator, I determined a limit of 48. Gejne 2003 includes only 8 dolnik lines from Wilhelm Sorgenfrei's translations and only 32 lines from Ratgauz's translation, which is why I supplemented the corpus with translations from other editions. These texts are marked with an asterisk in the list of texts examined (see the Appendix below).

	Rhythmic scheme	Blok 1911	Sorgenfrei 1938	Levik 1941–1956	Marshak 1951–1957	Ratgauz 1989–2003	Levansky 2003	Letuchy 2003	Total
Binary lines	(x)XxXxX(x)	30	6	20	11	—	6	11	84
	(x)XxxxxX(x)	12	1	6	4	1	1	1	26
Ternary lines	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	27	17	29	23	27	15	18	156
	(x)XxxxxxxX(x)	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Dolniks	(x)XxXxxX(x)	32	16	13	3	8	31	15	118
	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	26	6	7	5	11	20	26	101
	(x)XxxxxX(x)	5	1	3	1	1	6	2	19
Rhythmically ambiguous lines	(x)xxxxXxxX(x)	—	1	2	1	—	1	2	7
	(x)xxxxXxxX(x)	—	—	4	—	—	—	3	7
	(x)xxxxxxX(x)	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Total		132	48	84	48	48	80	80	520

Table 2: The share of rhythmic patterns

	Binary	Ternary	Dolniks
Heine (Tarlinskaja 1993, p. 80, table 5)	35%	20%	45%
Blok 1911	31.8%	20.5%	47.7%
Sorgenfrei 1938	14.9%	36.2%	48.9%
Levik 1941–1956	33.3%	37.2%	27%
Marshak 1951–1957	31.9%	48.9%	19.1%
Ratgauz 1989–2003	2.1%	56.3%	41.7%
Levansky 2003	8.9%	19%	72.2%
Letuchy 2003	16.2%	25.7%	58.1%
Russian dolnik 1890–1960 (Gasparov 1974, p. 225, table 3)	1%	19%	79%

Table 3: The share of rhythmic patterns (percentage of total)

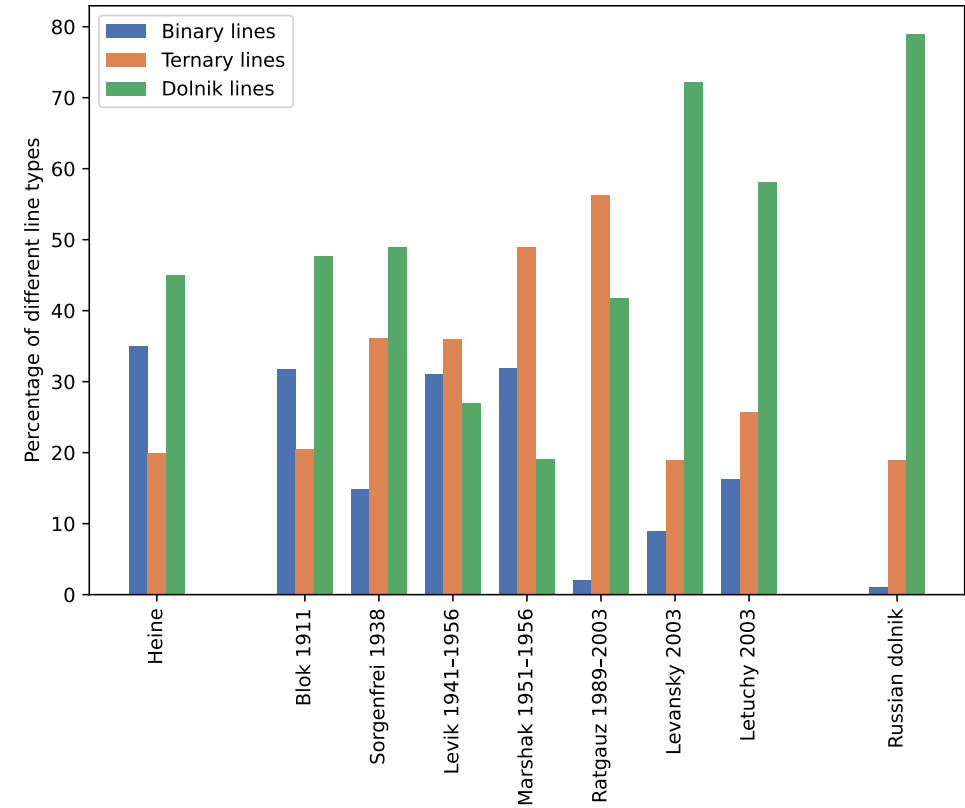


Figure 1: Preferences in the usage of line types

rhythmic type, in accordance with the practice of Russian poetry of this period (see Table 1), are the dolnik lines. Ratgauz's translations seem rhythmically oriented to the sound of the early Russian dolnik and Yuri Tynianov's translation of Heine's "Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen" (1934). I do not discuss here the structure of this translation because it was excluded from consideration along with other texts with alternating four-ictic lines and three-ictic lines. Let me note, nonetheless, that Tynianov made extensive use of ternary rhythmic variations (Example 3).

My znàem i mùzyku, znàem i tèkst,	(x)XxxXxxXxxX	2×2×2
I àvtorov znavàli;	(x)XxxxX(x)	3 (1×1)
Publichno slàvili vòdu onì,	(x)XxXxxXxxX	1×2×2
A dòma vinò popivàli.	(x)XxxXxxX(x)	2×2

Example 3: Yuri Tynianov's translation of Heine's "Germaniya", 1934

Tynianov adapted Heine's original meter to the rhythmic norms of the target language. Levansky and Letuchy do the same, showing strong preference for 'pure' dolnik lines with irregular unstressed intervals.

4 Conclusion

The examination of translations from Heine proved that the equirhythmic tradition started by Blok in the early 20th century was quite unstable and in the second half of the century translators switched to the non-equirhythmic type of verse translation, abandoning binary lines and showing strong preference for 'pure' dolnik lines with irregular unstressed intervals. While earlier equirhythmic translations clearly demonstrate the possibility to reproduce the rhythm of German dolnik in Russian, this switch to Russian dolnik's rhythm in the later translations provides strong evidence for the cultural reasons to avoid lines with binary and even ternary rhythm in this meter in Russian poetry.

Figure 2 shows two interconnected trends: the frequency of binary lines decreases and the frequency of dolnik lines increases in translations over time. 'Pure' dolnik verse has undergone final culture canonisation.

Nineteenth century Russian poets and readers rejected the "jerky rhythms" of the strict-stress meter, only making peace with "syllabic chaos" (Bailey 1969, p. 15) after the pioneering example of Blok's poems. By the end of the 20th century, this process was complete. Our data confirmed that even in the free domain of translation, the Russian dolnik was a stabilising force and functioned as if it was a new classical meter.

This conclusion could be expanded with an example of the same trend in dolnik translations of Spanish octosyllabic verse into Russian. Though the initial idea of representing syllabic rhythm using rhythmically-free dolnik was pursued in early 20th-century translations, later translations imbibed the rhythm of

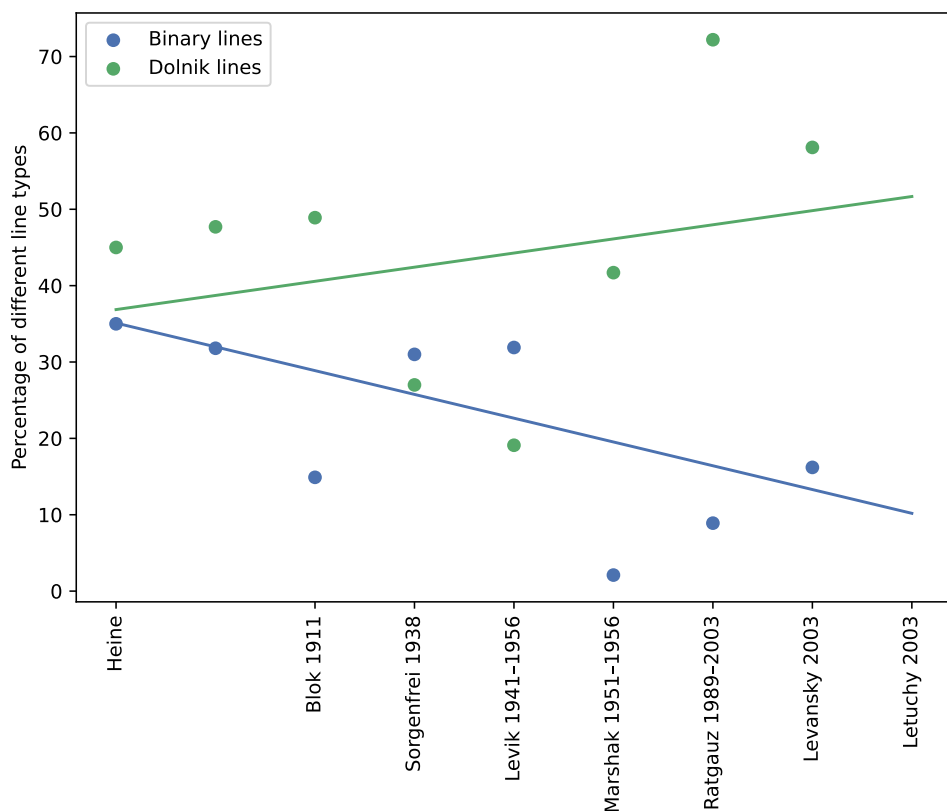


Figure 2: Changes in the usage of line types in translations

original Russian dolnik (with limited variability in rhythmic pattern). However, this is material for further discussion.

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Appendix

Alexander Blok ((published 1911, 132 lines)

1. "Не знаю, что́ значит такое..." ("Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten...") 24 lines
2. "Сырая ночь и буря..." ("Die Nacht ist feucht und stürmisch...") 20 lines
3. "Красавица рыбачка..." ("Du schönes Fischermädchen...") 12 lines
4. "Играет буря танец..." ("Der Sturm spielt auf zum Tanze...") 12 lines
5. "Вечер пришел безмолвный..." ("Der Abend kommt gezogen...") 32 lines

6. “На дальнем горизонте...” (“Am fernen Horizonte...”) 12 lines
7. “Ты знаешь, что живу я...” (“Wie kannst du ruhig schlafen...”) 12 lines
8. “Племена уходят в могилу...” (“Die Jahre kommen und gehen...”) 8 lines

Wilhelm Sorgenfrei (published 1938, 48 lines)

1. “Самоубийц хоронят...” (“Am Kreuzweg wird begraben...”) 8 lines
2. “Во сне я горько плакал...” * (“Ich hab’ im Traum’ geweinet...”) 12 lines
3. “Вот вызвал я силою слова...” * (“Da hab’ ich viel blasse Leichen...”) 28 lines

Wilhelm Levik (published 1941–1956, 84 lines)

1. “Пугливой лилии страшен...” (“Die Lotosblume ängstigt...”) 12 lines
2. “Как призрак забытый, из гроба...” (“Manch Bild vergessener Zeiten...”) 24 lines
3. “Сырая ночь беззвездна...” (“Der Herbstwind rüttelt die Bäume...”) 20 lines
4. “Мы возле рыбацкой лачуги...” (“Wir saßen am Fischerhause...”) 28 lines

Samuil Marshak (1940s-1950s, 48 lines)

1. “Весь отражен простором...” (“Im Rhein im schönen Strome...”) 12 lines
2. “Рокочут трубы оркестра...” (“Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen...”) 8 lines
3. “Двое перед разлукой...” (“Wenn zwei voneinander scheiden...”) 8 lines
4. “Трубят голубые гусары...” (“Es blasen die blauen Husaren...”) 8 lines
5. “Кричат, негодуя, кастраты...” (“Doch die Kastraten klagten...”) 12 lines

Greinem Ratgauz (published 1989–2003, 48 lines)

1. “Застыли недвижно звезды...” (“Es stehen unbeweglich...”) 12 lines
2. “На крыльях могучей песни...” (“Auf Flügeln des Gesanges...”) 20 lines
3. “Я вижу: звезда упала...” * (“Es fällt ein Stern herunter...”) 16 lines

Vladimir Levansky (published 2003, 80 lines)

1. “Под луною море без краю...” (“Der Mond ist aufgegangen...”) 12 lines
2. “Я побывал в том зале...” (“Ich trat in jene Hallen...”) 4 lines
3. “В каморке девушка дремлет...” (“Die Jungfrau schläft in der Kammer...”) 20 lines
4. “Застыл у ее портрета...” (“Ich stand in dunkeln Träumen...”) 12 lines

5. “Зачем слезой одинокой...” (“Was will die einsame Träne?..”) 16 lines

6. “Толкуют, что страсть моя – пытка...” (“Man glaubt, daß ich mich gräme...”) 16 lines

Vladimir Letuchy (published 2003, 80 lines)

1. “На богомолье в Кевлар” (“Die Wallfahrt nach Kevlaar”) 80 lines