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Slavic Comparative Metrics (SCM): The Research Program and the Circumstances of Its Implementation

*In memory of the participants of 35 years of cooperation
under the Slavic Comparative Metrics program*

Abstract

One of the most important achievements of Polish research on verse forms of poetry in the final decades of the 20th century was the organization of an international group implementing a program called Slavic Comparative Metrics, dealing with the comparative analysis of verse forms in Slavic literatures. The group's formation coincided with a time when the field of literary studies sought to clarify its methods, defining its place between linguistics and cultural studies. The program carried out by versologists was based on the concepts of language and poetry contained in the works of the Russian formalists and the Prague structuralists, and its formulation was directly influenced by the writings of Roman Jakobson as well as personal contacts with this scholar.

The article presents the circumstances in which the SCM group was set up at the Institute of Literary Research, describes its methods of work as well as subsequent goals and results. Research on a pan-Slavic scale revealed the influence

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of the different prosodic structures of individual languages on the possibility of implementing specific rhythmic patterns. This research shed light on the value of different forms in linguistically related literatures and on the choice of metrical equivalents in translation. The researchers also examined the functioning of verse structures in intercultural contacts within the Slavic area and metrical poetry as testimony to Slavic literatures belonging to the wider European community.

The team was active for 35 years despite the difficulties to which international cooperation was exposed in the political conditions of the time. The results of its work were published in nine volumes of the *Slavic Comparative Metrics* series.

Keywords: verse form of poetry, metrics, structuralism, Slavic Comparative Metrics.

The year 2024 is an important date in the history of Polish research on verse forms of poetry. To mark several “round” anniversaries accumulating at that time, an extensive collection of papers devoted to the history and theory of verse studies was published, representing various directions in verse structure analysis and theoretical reflection (Mastalski & Pietras, 2024). These works came in the wake of the conference *Around the Theory of Verse Structures: The Last Century in Versological Studies*, organized on March 30–31, 2023 by the Department of Theory and Anthropology of Literature at the Institute of Polish Philology of the Pedagogical University of Kraków, in association with the Section for the Poetics of Verse at the Faculty of Polish Studies of the University of Warsaw.

The result was a summary of achievements and an outline of the directions of change in the discipline at a time when the field of literary studies was gaining the status of a science based on objective principles and developing its own tools of analysis, seeking its place between linguistics and cultural studies. Over the last 50 years, these two systems of reference have shaped the methods of verse studies, and from the beginning, structural analyses of language and semiotics have had the greatest impact on the direction of studies on forms of poetry, enabling the interpretation of the metrical organization of text as a sign functioning in complex literary and cultural contexts.

In such circumstances, numerous works on the metrical structure of poems were created in Poland – from theoretical compendia and historical syntheses (Dłuska, 1978, 1980; Kulawik, 1988, 1995; Pszczółowska, 2001; Sadowski, 2004), through (mostly collective) elaborations of individual systems of verse published in the *Poetyka. Zarys Encyklopedyczny: Dział III Wersyfikacja* series, to many detailed analyses of metrical forms used in Polish poetry of



various periods. In the postwar decades, the research team organized by Maria Renata Mayenowa in Warsaw, at the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Literary Research, was particularly active. Mayenowa established a collaboration with Professor Maria Dłuska from Kraków and employed two of her students: Zdzisława Kopczyńska and Lucylla Pszczołowska. In such a team, expanded in the following years by younger researchers: Teresa Dobrzyńska, co-author of a monograph on Polish tonic verse (Dobrzyńska & Kopczyńska, 1979), and Dorota Urbańska, author of a monograph on free verse (Urbańska, 1995), systematic research on Polish verse structures was carried out for half a century, based on innovative methodological assumptions.

This research was founded on the concept of poetic language introduced by Roman Jakobson (see Polish edition of his selected writings: Jakobson, 1989), who developed and adopted the assumptions of structural linguistics. In the new program of verse studies, the principle of double segmentation of poetic texts – syntactic and metrical – was recognized as a constitutive feature of a poem. The tension resulting from the coexistence of these two overlapping structures influences the use of verse structures in poems and the differentiation of these systems in relation to styles, genres, poetics, and literary historical phenomena.

The acquisition of the structural theory of language and verse in Poland was facilitated by direct contacts with Jakobson, who is considered the most outstanding linguist and philologist of his time. These contacts were initiated and maintained for years by Mayenowa in direct meetings or through correspondence (see Mayenowa – Jakobson – Pomorska correspondence: Prussak, 2024a, 2024b). She had become acquainted with the innovative works of the Russian formalists during her studies in Vilnius at the seminars of Professor Manfred Kridl. After the war, she learned about the work of the Prague structuralists during her several-year stay in Czechoslovakia. With such a theoretical background and taking advantage of the opportunity to shape the scholarly profile of the newly established academic institution as the deputy director of the Institute of Literary Research (founded in 1948), Mayenowa strove to introduce innovative programs of literary theory research in Poland. As early as 1946, she tried to contact Jakobson, and from early 1957 she often consulted him on projects she was planning and endeavored to get him to participate in conferences she organized (Prussak, 2024b). Jakobson visited Poland several times: for a meeting of the International Committee of Slavists (January 1958) and for conferences devoted to poetics or semiotics, staying a few days each time (Krynica, October 1958; Kraków and Poznań, January 1959; Warsaw, August 1960; Jabłonna, September 1961; Warsaw, August 1964; Warsaw,



August 1965; Kazimierz nad Wisłą, September 1966). The long-standing correspondence between these scholars shows to what extent Jakobson's views and opinions, as well as his direct presence as a lecturer, contributed to the design of the research carried out by Mayenowa's team, later published as part of the *Poetyka. Zarys Encyklopedyczny: Dział III* series (Batora et al., 2002, p. 17).

Inspired by Jakobson's ideas and structural linguistics, the SCM team created a program for the study of poems that treats their various metrical forms and compositional shapes as specific ways of using language in a text. They play the role of filters that distill various linguistic units and shape the style of the poem depending on the adopted metrics. Such an approach made it possible to discover the linguistic specificity of individual ways of organizing verse, and on this foundation it was also possible to compare the realization of poetry and prose, and to juxtapose the stylistic characteristics of different metrical forms. In the longer term, one might look for stylistic differences and analogies within forms of poetry realized in different languages. For this reason, it seemed very promising to extend the principles of metrical analysis outlined above, which had already been applied in the native context, to a program of comparative research, carried out primarily on the material of related Slavic languages.

This expansion occurred in a somewhat automatic way, because both Jakobson himself and Polish researchers of verse forms met at Slavic conventions and congresses, and the traditions of Russian formalism and Czech structuralism and their Polish continuations determined the scope of the most natural international collaboration. Comparative studies on the implementation of verse forms in various Slavic literatures revealed obvious differences resulting from separate cultural traditions and the influence of literary trends, but, above all, they revealed that the individual languages' prosodic structures and the distinctiveness of their linguistic material affected the possibility of producing different verse patterns. These dependences justify and explain the popularity of different metrical forms in different literatures, or the choice of specific types of meter in different literatures in the case of translations.

The first stage of research coordination involved a conference organized by the Institute of Literary Research in May 1969; participants' papers were published in the volume *Metryka słowiańska* (Kopczyńska & Pszczołowska, 1971). The title of the volume signals a collection of works by authors from the Slavic area, who included Russian philologists Vladislav E. Kholshevnikov, Mikhail L. Gasparov, Petr A. Rudnev and Marina G. Tarlinskaya, Serbo-Croatian verse researcher Svetozar Petrović, Czech versologist Miroslav Červenka, Slovak scholar Tibor Zsilka, Bulgarians Atanas Slavov and Canko Mladenov,



and a group of Polish authors: Stefan Sawicki, Maria Grzędzińska, Stanisław Balbus, Adam Kulawik, Jacek Baluch, Tadeusz Kuryś, Jerzy Bartmiński as well as (representing the host community) Maria Renata Mayenowa, Zdzisława Kopczyńska and Lucylla Pszczołowska. The range of topics in the volume was considerable; individual authors presented the results of differently directed analyses conducted on the material of native verse. Differences were also often revealed in the way basic concepts were defined. I highlight this – otherwise frequent – fact of the substantial dispersion of topics and methods presented in the collective volumes in order to emphasize the fundamental change that was soon to take place in the program of analyses coordinated by the Warsaw researchers.

The volume *Metryka słowiańska* thus became a platform for scholars to meet. It was an initial presentation of topics and methods of analyzing verse structures, which would be undertaken in the future in closely coordinated research by a group of authors representing various languages and literatures from the Slavic region. Coordinated work began from the first half of the 1970s,¹ in a regular rhythm of meetings and with the participation of researchers representing several Slavic nations. The program, which was a great achievement of Slavic studies and an unprecedented implementation of multifaceted extensive research on verse structures, went down in the history of science under the name of Slavic Comparative Metrics (SCM);² this was the term used to sign subsequent volumes of the collective studies series. On Mayenowa's initiative, the project was created at the Institute of Literary Research in the course of consultations with eminent specialists from other countries, participants of the 1969 conference. Its main coordinators were Kopczyńska (until her death in 1982) and Pszczołowska (in later years with organizational support from Dorota Urbańska). The working meetings were attended by a fairly small group of professional discussants, including Jerzy Woronczak who was, first and foremost, an advisor on statistical issues. The collaboration continued for 35 years, and expired with the passing of the last eminent participants.³

The research was carried out simultaneously on the material of specific types of verse structures occurring in various Slavic literatures – always

¹ A collective article by the participants of the SCM project was published in *Pamiętnik Literacki* academic journal, see Červenka et al. (1973).

² In Polish: *Słowiańska Metryka Porównawcza*.

³ Červenka, Petrović and Gasparov died in 2005, and Pszczołowska in 2010. Mayenowa, who was the patron of the project and a regular participant in the discussion, died in 1988.



focusing on a jointly selected issue, following strictly established rules, and maintaining the statistical representativeness of the material. The results of subsequent stages of the analysis are collected in nine volumes (see: *Slavic Comparative Metrics* series, I–IX).⁴

There is no space here for a broader outline of the content of the individual volumes,⁵ but even a cursory review of the topics shows that the series covered a very wide range of issues: from the study of the linguistic characteristics of individual meters (those most often used in given literatures), through the problem of the semantic function of verse forms (recognition of the role played by metrical systems and verse structures in relation to the style, genre and subject matter of works in Slavic literatures of the second half of the 19th century). The choice of meters in translations between Slavic poems written by the brilliant poets Adam Mickiewicz and Alexander Pushkin was also explored, as was the use of short verse lengths that are the legacy of the ancient cultural community of the Slavs. The last two volumes are devoted to the sonnet, hexameter and other verse forms that link Slavic literatures with the Mediterranean European tradition.

It should be added that this extensive analysis of the forms and functions of verse structures in Slavic literatures was complemented by research (constituting a kind of supplement to the SCM program) that focused on two Slavic literatures: Polish and Ukrainian, which remained in direct contact with each other due to their territorial proximity and the interpenetration of cultures (Pszczółowska & Czamata, 2007).

* * *

Looking at the long-time coordinated collaboration of researchers from various Slavic countries presented above, it is impossible not to express surprise that it turned out to be possible at all in the political conditions prevailing in Europe behind the Iron Curtain at that time and then under martial law in Poland in the 1980s, with constant restrictions on civil liberties, universal surveillance, censorship pressure, and persecutions that intensified from time to time. Even in the case of such seemingly ideologically neutral topics as the verse structure and function of poems, meetings and discussions of scholars became suspicious – especially when it came to international bodies. Estab-

⁴ The last volume of the series, written with the participation of Pszczółowska as the main coordinator of the research but published after her death, was dedicated to the memory of the eminent co-creators and participants of the program: Červenka, Gasparov and Petrović.

⁵ For more information, see Pszczółowska (2008, 2014).

lishing contacts across national borders required determination and personal commitment, ingenuity and caution. However, cooperation in the SCM program was established and lasted for many years! Great effort was put into preparing extensive studies for subsequent conferences, and sometimes into organizing private visits by conference participants when they couldn't attend officially. The implementation of the SCM program was successful mainly thanks to the conviction of the participating researchers that this joint scientific project was innovative and worth continuing, and of great importance.

Slavic Comparative Metrics series

- vol. I: *Słownik rytmiczny i sposoby jego wykorzystania* (1978). Kopczyńska, Z. & Pszczołowska, L. (Eds.). Ossolineum.
- vol. II: *Organizacja składniowa* (1984). Kopczyńska, Z. & Pszczołowska, L. (Eds.). Ossolineum.
- vol. III: *Semantyka form wierszowych* (1988). Pszczołowska, L. (Ed.). Ossolineum.
- vol. IV: *Wiersz przekładu. Mickiewicz i Puszkina* (1992). Pszczołowska, L. Urbańska, D. (Eds.). Ossolineum.
- vol. V: *Sonet* (1993). Pszczołowska, L. & Urbańska, D. (Eds.). Wydawnictwo IBL.
- vol. VI: *Europejskie wzorce metryczne w literaturach słowiańskich* (1995). Červenka, M. & Pszczołowska, L. & Urbańska, D. (Eds.). Wydawnictwo IBL.
- vol. VII: *Wiersz wolny. Geneza i ewolucja do roku 1939* (1998). Pszczołowska, L. & Urbańska, D. (Eds.). Wydawnictwo IBL.
- vol. VIII: *Krótkie rozmiary wierszowe* (2004). Pszczołowska, L. & Urbańska, D. (Eds.). Wydawnictwo IBL.
- vol. IX: *Heksamet. Antyczne wzorce wiersza i strofy w literaturach słowiańskich* (2011). Pszczołowska, L. & Łotman, M. (Eds.). Wydawnictwo IBL.

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Słowiańska Metryka Porównawcza (SMP) – program badań i okoliczności jego realizacji

Jednym z najważniejszych osiągnięć polskiej wersologii w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach XX wieku było zorganizowanie przy Instytucie Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk międzynarodowej grupy badawczej realizującej program pod nazwą Słowiańska Metryka Porównawcza, a zajmującej się analizą porównawczą użycia form wierszowych w literaturach słowiańskich. Powstanie grupy przypadło na czas, gdy literaturoznawstwo dążyło do uściślenia swych metod, określając swe miejsce między dziedzinami badań języka i kultury. Pro-



gram realizowany przez wersologów opierał się na koncepcjach języka i poezji zawartych w pracach formalistów rosyjskich i strukturalistów praskich, a na jego formułowanie bezpośredni wpływ miały pisma Romana Jakobsona i osobiste kontakty z tym uczonym.

W artykule przedstawione zostały okoliczności utworzenia grupy SMP przy IBL PAN, opisano metody jej pracy oraz kolejne realizowane cele i główne rezultaty. Badania o zasięgu ogólnosłowiańskim ujawniały wpływ odmiennej budowy prozodyjnej poszczególnych języków na możliwość realizacji określonych wzorców rytmicznych. Rzucały światło na wartość różnych form wiersza w spokrewnionych językowo literaturach oraz na wybór ekwiwalentów metrycznych w przekładzie. Badano także funkcjonowanie struktur wierszowych w aspekcie kontaktów międzykulturowych w obrębie słowiańszczyzny i poezję metryczną jako świadectwo przynależności literatur słowiańskich do szerszej wspólnoty europejskiej.

Zespół działał przez 35 lat mimo trudności, na jakie narażona była współpraca międzynarodowa w ówczesnych warunkach politycznych. Rezultaty jego prac opublikowane zostały w dziewięciu tomach serii „Słowiańska Metryka Porównawcza”.

Słowa kluczowe: forma wiersza, metryka, strukturalizm, Słowiańska Metryka Porównawcza.

Note

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