Congratulatory speech at the Book Launch of *LIFETIME LINGUISTIC INSPIRATIONS:* *To Igor Mel'čuk from Colleagues and Friends for his 90th Birthday* (*Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 101; Peter Lang, 2022) at the Département de linguistique et de traduction, Université de Montréal 9:00 AM - 12 noon (and via Zoom), recorded here: [https://umontreal.zoom.us/rec/share/\_bJgkuunAQFIyLWFxuXCu1mHD\_THAlIrHxJOv3whtJPdaBdKlGjAejubC-THEMnK.bpFUj7qZoj479pZy](https://urldefense.com/v3/__https:/umontreal.zoom.us/rec/share/_bJgkuunAQFIyLWFxuXCu1mHD_THAlIrHxJOv3whtJPdaBdKlGjAejubC-THEMnK.bpFUj7qZoj479pZy__;!!LIr3w8kk_Xxm!rMNCG8bHoW_oDZq1vdbV0dx5wRg-qOkzf1sGTL522fu7d6ljqkWYDw5sah16Ihyw4i5WsaHI2HRt5IceY55QRc2srl0$)

Dear Colleagues, dear Igor’!

I’m the last to speak today but was the first among all present here to know Igor – I’ve known and loved him for 70 years!

As a student and then a budding scholar I admired Igor already a great linguist and was honored when about 60 years ago he included me in his inner linguistic team. We worked together for over a decade and co-authored some major work on the Meaning-Text Model. Those were the years!

Igor approved of what I did as part of our common linguistic project but was quite dismissive of my studies in poetics. He considered poetics a nonsensical waste of time but would reluctantly let me practice it on my time if that kept me happy and thus made me more efficient as a linguist.

One of my linguistic ideas he valued more than others and he dedicated to it his piece in the Festschrift for my 80th birthday. It is entitled: “‘WORDLETS’: One of Zholkovsky’s Major Contributions to the Notion of Deep-Syntactic Structure?” And I quote:

Languages have particular syntactic constructions that express meanings of the lexical type --that is, meanings that are normally expressed by lexical units. The stock example is the Russian “approximate” numeral construction: a. *desjat´ kilometrov* ‘10 kilometers’ versus b. *kilometrov desjat´* ‘maybe 10 kilometers.’

These “deviant” sur­face-syntactic constructions should be represented at the deep syntactic level by artificial lexical units: fictitious lexemes. However, this is how we reason today! Almost fifty years ago this idea had never occurred to anybody -- that is, anybody except Zholkovsky.

Very generous—thank you, Igor!

Igor exemplifies the principle with several similar cases in various languages. I’ll add just one from Spanish (the foreign language in which Igor majored as a student of *Filfak* -- the School of Philology, the Moscow State University): **casa casa** means “a really proper house, a housey house”, while in some other languages such a reduplication can signify the plural, or big size, or something else.

Now, Igor, have you ever wondered how come I happened to develop that particular idea and why you liked it so much? I think I know the answer.

CONVEYING MEANING VIA STRUCTURES IS WHAT POETICS IS ALL ABOUT.

Let me bring up just two examples.

One is a poem by a 25-year old Evariste Parny (1753-1814), quite relevant to the theme of our today’s meeting: it is about postponing old age. Please note that the rhyme scheme of the final stanza, unlike that of the two previous ones, is XYYYX (rather than XYYX). I’ll recite the poem now – please, pardon my French:

**A MES AMIS (1778**)

Rions, chantons, ô mes amis, **A**  
Occupons-nous à ne rien faire, **B**  
Laissons murmurer le vulgaire, **B**  
Le plaisir est toujours permis. A

Que notre existence légère **B**  
S’évanouisse dans les jeux. **C**  
Vivons pour nous, soyons heureux, **C**  
N’importe de quelle manière. **B**

**Un jour il faudra nous courber D  
Sous la main du temps qui nous presse; E  
Mais jouissons dans la jeunesse, E  
ET DÉROBONS À LA VIEILLESSE E  
Tout ce qu’on peut lui dérober. D**

The “extra” fourth line, which extends the stanza, speaks precisely about extending life by postponing old age. Parny lived to be 61.

Pushkin, who at 21 translated the poem into Russian, ignored the addition of the extra line to the third stanza and -- as a result? -- died at a much earlier age. (In fact, he failed to observe Parny’s “moderately protracted” ABBA rhyme scheme of the previous stanzas, replacing it with the pedestrian ABAB).

**ДОБРЫЙ СОВЕТ (1820)**

Давайте пить и веселиться, **A**  
Давайте жизнию играть, **B**  
Пусть чернь слепая суетится, **A**  
Не нам безумной подражать. **B**

Пусть наша ветреная младость **C**Потонет в неге и вине, **D**  
Пусть изменяющая радость **C**  
Нам улыбнется хоть во сне. **D**

**Когда же юность легким дымом E  
Умчит веселья юных дней, F  
Тогда у старости отымем E  
Все, что отымется у ней. F**

My second example is from Boris Pasternak’s 1917 poem (he was 27 when he wrote it) «Гроза, моментальная навек» (“A Thunderstorm Instantaneous Forever”). It’s once again about stopping time.

In the poem, night-time lightning is portrayed as photographing the landscape. And the poetic challenge is to make the many details of the landscape (which take two quatrains and then another two to describe in the text), – to make them all seem highlighted simultaneously.

What does Pasternak do? He resorts to the so-called sliding rhyme scheme ABCD ABCD, so that eight lines become as if one rhyming moment.

**ГРОЗА, МОМЕНТАЛЬНАЯ НАВЕК (1917)**

А затем прощалось **лето** **A**

С полустанком. Снявши **шапку**, **B**

Сто слепящих **фотографий** **C**

Ночью снял на память **гром**. **D**

Меркла кисть сирени. B **это** **A**

Время он, нарвав **охапку** **B**

Молний, с поля ими **трафил C**

Озарить управский **дом**. **D**

И когда по кровле **зданья E**

Разлилась волна **злорадства F**

И, как уголь по **рисунку**, **J**

Грянул ливень всем **плетнем**, **D**

Стал мигать обвал **сознанья**: **E**

Вот, казалось, **озарятся F**

Даже те углы **рассудка**, **J**

Где теперь светло, как **днем**! **D**

To conclude:

If it were not for my interest in poetics, I probably wouldn’t have been able to come up with the idea of “wordlets.”

And if you, Igor, deep down in your deep emotional structure, were not a poet/poetician, you wouldn’t have appreciated it.

You have ten years to come to grips with this -- and see you at your centennial!