

Vershok/Unit in Translations of Russian Classical Literature and in Real Life

"The Translators' Charter, Comrade Lifanov, states that translation in the modern world should promote better mutual understanding between peoples, but your babble will only create division."

Film "Autumn Marathon"

A vershok (вершок) is one of the units of length in the pre-reform (pre-1927) Russian system of measurement. Sixteen vershoks make an arshin (аршин), three arshins make a sazhen (сажень), and 500 sazhens make a verst (верста, approximately a kilometer). In 1830, Nicholas I issued a decree equating the sazhen to seven English feet, which then defined the dimensions of all other lengths. Before this, there was some inconsistency: the sazhen had different lengths in different territories of the vast Russian state. Two thousand four hundred square sazhens constituted a dessiatina (десятина, approximately a hectare), which figures in the long history of complex land relations in our country. Recall Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, where Stiva Oblonsky describes Konstantin Levin: *"Three thousand dessiatines in the Karazinsky district, everything before him; and what youth and vigor!"* Touching on the topic of the report, we should immediately note that in the lady's (Constance Garnett) English translation of this most famous ladies' novel, Levin's land ownership was for some reason understated to six thousand acres: *"Over six thousand acres in the Karazinsky district; everything before him; and what youth and vigor!"* [1]. In fact, three thousand dessiatines is approximately 8,100 acres. Such inaccuracies in translations can be pinned down to the last inch.

Classic Russian literature (by Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and others) frequently mentions vershoks, arshins, sazhens, versts, dessiatinas, and other units, which often trip up translators. Let's discuss this, starting with definitions. You can, of course, go online and find out how many millimeters are in a vershok, or you can take a different approach and use the following hint.

So, a fathom (2.1336 m) is seven feet (...under the keel), an arshin (71.12 cm) is a third of a fathom, and a vershok (44.45 mm) is one-sixteenth of an arshin. Let's start from the other end of this memorization scheme: a vershok is seven-fourths of an inch (unit – see below!), an arshin is 16 vershoks, and a fathom is three arshins. Daniil Kharms said: "My phone number is easy to remember: 32-08 – thirty-two teeth and eight fingers." This Russian classic of absurdist literature was a visionary: the list of numbers that are powers of 2: 0, 1, 2 (bit), 4, 8 (byte), 16, 32, etc. is one of the pillars of modern information technology in terms of software (in terms of hardware, the tone is set by the aforementioned unit, that is, the vershok, – see below). It would be better if humans had eight fingers instead of ten – like dogs on their hind legs. Then, in everyday life, we would have an octal, rather than a decimal, number system, and it would be easier for us to communicate with digital computing equipment.

A translator from English to Russian can safely leave in the text inches, feet, pounds and other international rather than Anglo-American units of length, mass, and area.

Translators of Russian texts with old units of measurement, particularly the “main” vershok, cannot do this. They are forced to recalculate, making unfortunate errors in the process (see example above). These inaccuracies, as a rule, do not distort the meaning of the text, but they do force the meticulous reader to reflect and conduct a little research, the results of which are reflected in this report. Here's another typical example. We read in Turgenev's second paragraph of the story "Mumu":

"Of all her servants, the most remarkable person was the janitor Gerasim, a man twelve vershoks tall, built like a giant and deaf and dumb from birth."

Most modern readers don't think about Gerasim's height in centimeters—the two words "twelve vershoks" are perceived as the same as "very tall." But a meticulous reader will want, and a translator is obliged to know, what 12 vershoks means. The result is a discouraging 53.34 cm. Everything falls into place if we consider that by default, two arshins (142.24 cm), the base from which the height of a normal adult is measured, are not mentioned: $142.24 + 53.34 = 194.58$ cm. This is a very tall height even by the standards of our time, when the average height of a person is ten centimeters higher than it was in Turgenev's time.

Gogol's Sobakevich from Dead Souls could not use this silence in his dispute with Chichikov: *"And what about Stepan Korbka, the carpenter? I'll bet my life if you find a man like him anywhere. What a man he was! If he'd served in the guards, God knows what they'd have given him—three and a half arshins tall!"*. Tolstoy wrote in his story "Kholstomer" *"The gelding was tall – no less than two arshins and three vershoks."* But there was another omission: horses' heights were measured from the withers, not from the crown, as with humans. But in his novel "Anna Karenina," Tolstoy used both omissions.: *"There were five horses in their stalls in the barracks, and Vronsky knew that his main rival, Makhotin's five-vershok-long chestnut Gladiator, would be brought there that very day and would be standing there..."*. It's not an easy job, translation!

Here is one of the English translations of Sobakevich's exclamation: "And look, too, at Probka Stepan, the carpenter <...>. I will wager my head that nowhere else would you find such a workman. What a strong fellow he was! He had served in the Guards, and the Lord only knows what they had given for him, seeing that he was over three arshins in height." The anonymous translator [2] left the arshins, but removed the vershok, adding the word over – more than three arshins (fathoms). It would be a sin not to insert a couple more colorful quotes from Gogol's immortal poem.: *"And the courier is already there, you see: some three-yard-tall peasant, with huge hands, you can imagine, by his very nature made for coachmen - in a word, a kind of dentist..."*. This courier was picking up Captain Kopeikin from the palace of the dignitary, which Gogol, through the mouth of the eloquent postmaster, described as follows: *"The hut, you see, is peasant-like: glass in the windows, can you imagine, one-and-a-half-fathom mirrors"*.

But let's return to Turgenev.

In English translation [3] the quote from "Mumu" about the janitor Gerasim looks like this: *"Of all her servants, the most remarkable personage was the porter, Gerasim, a man full twelve inches over the normal height, of heroic build, and deaf and dumb from his birth."* The translator

quite cleverly avoided both the inches and the omission of two arshins, while retaining the magical number twelve. If we take into account the normal height of an adult man in Turgenev's time (177 cm [4] minus 10 cm plus 12 inches), we get approximately 196-198 cm.

And here's what you can read in Dostoevsky's novel "The Idiot" - in the episode where Rogozhin brings Nastasya Filippovna cash - one hundred thousand rubles.

Firstly, he found himself in Rogozhin's company " *...some huge gentleman, about twelve inches tall, also unusually fat, extremely gloomy and silent, and obviously relying heavily on his fists* ". We've already noted and explored these twelve vershoks in Turgenev. But there's a nuance here that translators often overlook. "Twelve vershoks" and "vershoks twelve " differ not only in form but also in content and meaning, given the title of this discussion, "...from texts to meaning." We can say in Russian, "The height of this cabinet is two meters." Or we can say, "The height of this cabinet is meters two." The first case means we measured the height of the cabinet with a ruler and found it to be exactly two meters. The second case means we estimated the height of the cabinet by eye and decided it was approximately two meters.

One of the authors asked his colleague in England about this nuance of the Russian language and received the following answer: "English doesn't have the nuance you mentioned through word order. We would say the cabinet is exactly two meters, and the cabinet is about (meaning approximately) two meters. If we just said the cabinet is two meters it would generally be taken to mean approximately so. The statement: " the cabinet is meters two" sounds weird in English, where the adjective generally precedes the noun."

The following message was sent in pursuit:

I've just thought of an exception to the rule that adjectives precede nouns in English. In children's Nursey rhymes (or poetry generally I guess) it can happen. For example, the nursery rhyme, "Old King Cole", begins as follows:

*"Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he;
He called for his pipe, and he called for his bowl,
And he called for his fiddlers three,"*

In standard prose it isn't really acceptable though.

In Russian poetry, one can also note such a forced reversal of the adjective and noun, related to the poetic meter. One example " *And from our window / Square Red is visible!*". Incidentally, it's worth noting that the English translation of this square's name (Red Square) isn't entirely accurate. It's not red, but rather beautiful and lovely. Of course, tastes differ. This rule, incidentally, also applies to translations. The French translation (Place Rouge) repeats the word order of Mikhalkov's famous poem, but lacks any poetic context.

Now about "cashing out".

Reading Dostoevsky: " *It was a large bundle of paper, about three vershok thick and four vershok long, tightly and securely wrapped in the "Stock exchange newspaper" and tied tightly on all sides and twice crosswise with twine, like the kind they use to tie sugar loaves.* ".

Translation by Eva Martin [5] looks like this:

"This was a paper packet, some six or seven inches thick, and eight or nine in length, wrapped in an old newspaper, and tied round three or four times with string".

Firstly, the "Stock exchange newspaper" was missing from the translation. And why, exactly?! It is possible that Fyodor Mikhailovich, with this clarification, a) reiterated that Rogozhin was from a merchant family where no other newspapers were read or kept, and b) the sum of one hundred thousand arose from an open bargaining between Rogozhin and Nastasya Filippovna for the right to the first, pardon me, nth night. And trading is the foundation of any exchange.

Secondly, closer to the topic of this report, three vershoks is 13.335 cm, and four vershoks is 17.78 cm. But three vershoks and four vershoks are roughly three and four vershoks – something around 13 and 18 cm. The translator expressed this aforementioned nuance of the Russian language with a range – six or seven inches (15.24-17.78 cm – 4 vershoks is exactly 7 inches!) and eight or nine inches (20.32-22.86 cm). In translation, "physics prevails over lyricism"! The translator here accurately calculated the thickness/height of the pack, but for some reason made a significant error in the length.

But the main thing is that from the Russian quote it is immediately clear that it is referring to a pack of money. In the English translation, this obviousness is lost. It is obscured by numbers.

Continue reading Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" in Russian:

" Above the door to the next room hung one painting, rather strange in its shape, about two and a half arshins in length and no more than six vershoks in height. "

...and in English:

"Over the door, however, there was one of strange and rather striking shape; it was six or seven feet in length, and not more than a foot in height".

Let's count again.

Two and a half arshins is two arshins and six vershoks (let's remember this), or approximately 178 cm. And six vershoks is approximately a quarter of a meter. Translated, six or seven feet is approximately 183 or 214 m (a Russian fathom, or three arshins), and a foot is approximately 30 cm..

One of the report's authors, while in Basel, made a special trip to the local art museum to see Hans Holbein the Younger's painting "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb." It depicts Christ as realistically as no one had ever depicted him before. And, mind you, it's life-size. (Recall the absurdly ironic line: "The Alexander Column in St. Petersburg is crowned with a life-size statue of an angel.") The author, while in the museum, opened up "The Idiot" on his smartphone and reread the passage in the novel that describes this painting. Not in Russian, but in the local language—German.: *" Above the door to the next room hung a picture of quite striking format: over one and a half meters long and not much more than a quarter of a meter high "*.

It should be noted that the translator of "The Idiot" into English was closest to the truth - see caption to Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Holbein — Dead Christ (Wood, Tempera. 30,5 × 200 см)

But Dostoevsky's assessment of the painting's size can be understood. Fyodor Dostoevsky, upon seeing the painting at an exhibition in Basel in 1867, was struck by its depiction of Christ. His wife, Anna Grigoryevna, recalled: "*The painting made an overwhelming impression on Fyodor Mikhailovich, and he stopped before it as if amazed... His agitated face had that frightened expression that I had often noticed in the first minutes of an epileptic attack.*".

Yes, translations of classic Russian literature require editing in new editions. However, the vershok can easily be replaced with a modern unit of length, namely the unit that emerged in the era of computer technology.

This assembly unit measures the height of specialized equipment within the 19-inch rack standard—telecommunications, server, network, control system and industrial automation equipment, data center equipment, and professional music equipment housed in specialized racks or cabinets with a standard system of structures for fastening such equipment [6]. Designations are U, RU (from the English rack unit), or RMU (from the English rack-mount unit). A unit is equal to 44.45 mm (or 1.75 inches)—our almost forgotten vershok! The mounting holes in the rack on the supporting structures are arranged so that, when mounted horizontally, only equipment with a height equal to a whole number of units can be fastened without gaps (Fig. 2).

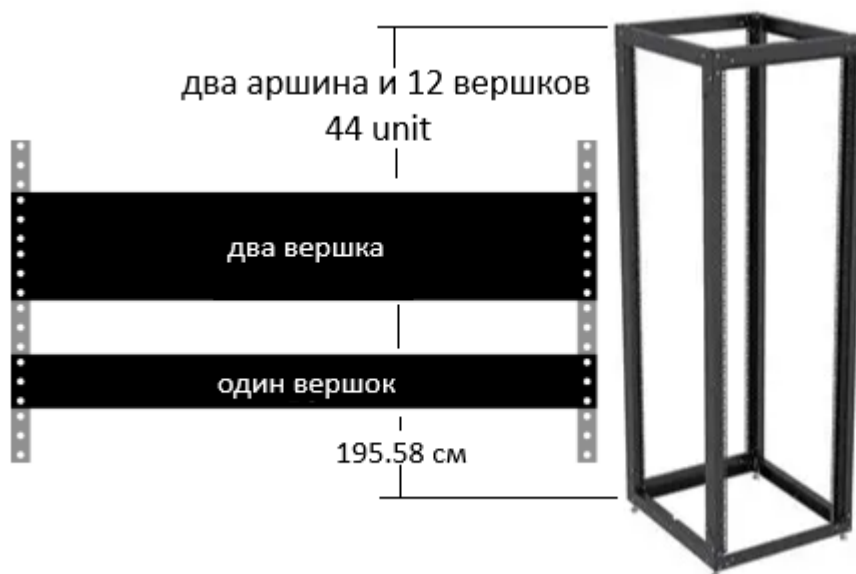


Fig. 2. Typical telecommunications rack

And how did it happen that computer equipment is measured in vershok these days? Legend has it that this unit of length was introduced into circulation in the United States by a second or third

generation Soviet immigrant. He recalled the Russian vershok, equal, as we already noted, to an inch and three-quarters—"neither two nor one and a half." So, we can now install one-, two-, three-vershok-, and other equivalent equipment in computer centers.

An important reason why the vershok/unit should become the basic unit of human growth is the following. If we construct a chart of human growth, the range of values along the x-axis is best measured in vershok [7-8]—see Fig. 3. In this case, we move from numerical estimates to linguistic ones.

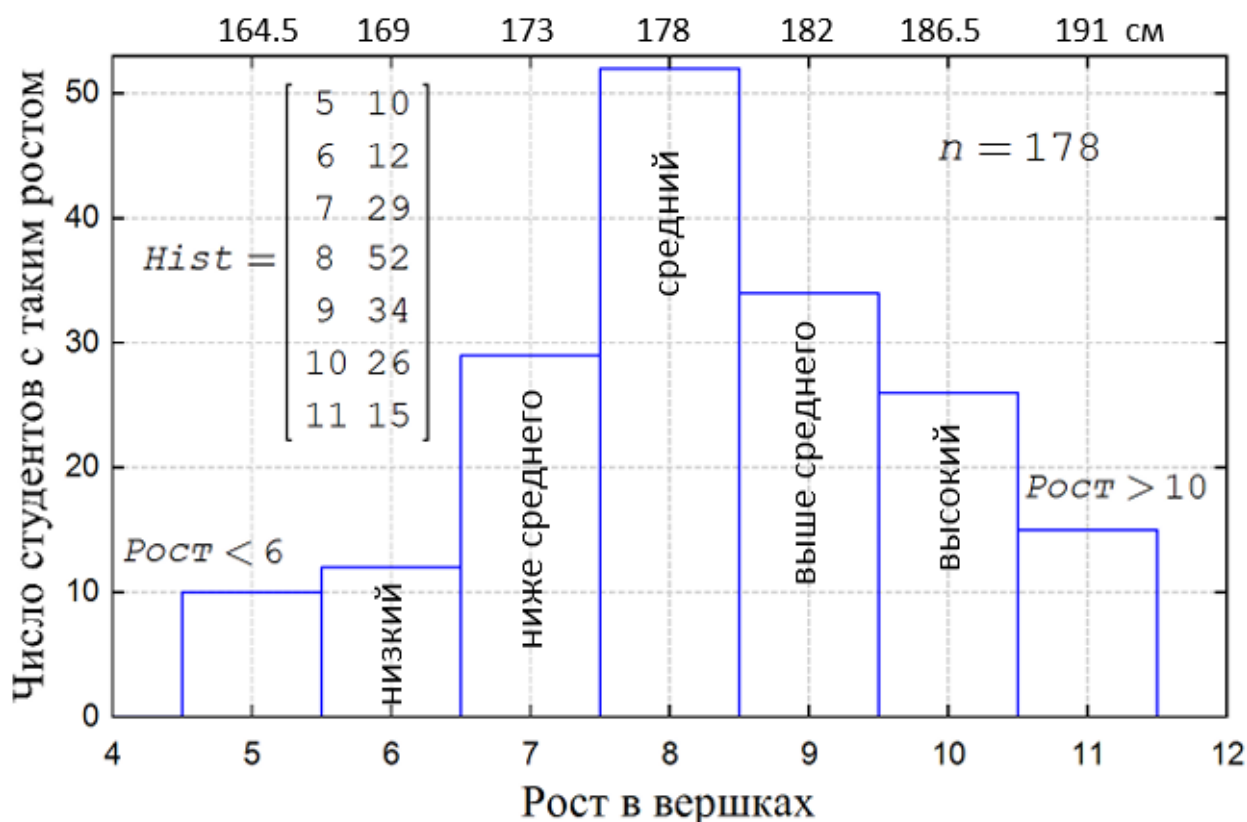


Fig. 3. Histogram of students' growth

Literature

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