



Formal Approaches to Poetry

Recent Developments in Metrics

B. ELAN DRESHER · NILA FRIEDBERG
Editors

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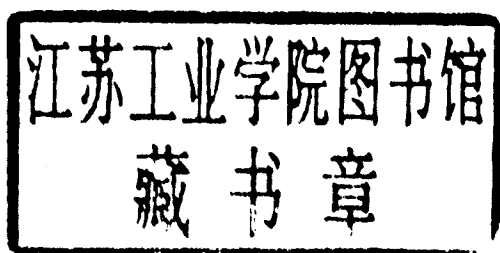
Formal Approaches to Poetry

Recent Developments in Metrics

edited by

B. Elan Dresher

Nila Friedberg



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Introduction

B. Elan Dresher and Nila Friedberg

This book focuses on formal approaches to poetic meter. It is well known that poetic language involves the repetition of items in artistically significant ways. Poets can repeat syllables at the ends of lines (the phenomenon called rhyme), or consonants at the beginnings of stressed words (alliteration), or they can alternate perceptually strong and weak syllables (meter). By 'formal approaches' we mean analyses that aim to shed light on the nature of these aspects of poetic language. Some of the questions that the book is concerned with include: 'What are the rules that govern formal elements of poetic language in particular traditions or poets?', 'Which line types do poets never produce, and why?', and 'Why do certain metrical patterns sound better than others?'. It is very common in literary studies to make intuitive statements about a poet's style; it is said, for example, that Milton sounds 'complex', or that Pope sounds 'light', or that some Russian poems of Joseph Brodsky sound 'English'. Formal linguistic study offers an objective way to measure such intuitions with the help of rules or constraints.

The major purpose of this book is to bridge the gulf that exists in much Western literary scholarship between the purely literary and the purely formal study of poetic composition. Within scholarly traditions in Eastern Europe such a gulf never came about. In fact Roman Jakobson, a leading Russian linguistic theorist associated with the Prague School and one of the precursors of generative linguistics, was a prolific literary scholar. In Western Europe and North America, however, the study of literary technique is split into different schools that rarely interact: scholars in linguistics departments tend to focus mainly on formal studies of meter, and scholars in English and literature departments study other aspects of literary technique. The result is that interesting formal studies of verse are often confined to linguistics conferences and publications, and so are relatively inaccessible to literary scholars.

The aim of this book is to create greater public awareness of some recent exciting findings in the formal study of meter. The last influential volume on

the subject, *Rhythm and Meter*, edited by Paul Kiparsky and Gilbert Youmans (Academic Press, San Diego, 1989), appeared over fifteen years ago. This volume brought together leading exponents of the theory of generative metrics with representatives of other approaches to the study of meter. Kiparsky and Youmans' (1989) volume remains an indispensable reference to the most advanced thinking on poetic meter at the end of the 1980s.

Since that time, a number of important theoretical developments have taken place, which have led to new approaches to the analysis of meter. For example, Optimality Theory, developed by Prince and Smolensky (1993), suggests that speakers of a language generate a number of logically possible candidates to be pronounced, and choose the optimal one, that is, the form that best satisfies a set of possibly conflicting constraints. Languages may rank the constraints differently, so that in case of conflict, the form that satisfies the higher-ranking constraint is the one that wins out. Under this approach, the patterns of poetic meter are also seen as different ways of satisfying a set of constraints. Different rankings of constraints will produce different patterns of poetic lines.

This volume represents some of the most exciting current thinking on the theory of meter. It includes a number of papers that were presented at the conference on Formal Approaches to Poetry that took place at the University of Toronto on October 8-10, 1999, and some papers that were submitted at a later time. In terms of empirical coverage, the papers focus on a wide variety of languages, including English, Finnish, Estonian, Russian, Japanese, Somali, Old Norse, Latin, and Greek. Thus, the collection is truly international in its scope.

The volume contains diverse theoretical approaches that are brought together for the first time, including Optimality Theory (Kiparsky, Hammond), other constraint-based approaches (Friedberg, Hall, Scherr), a mora-based approach (Cole and Miyashita, Fitzgerald), a semantic-pragmatic approach (Fabb), and an alternative generative approach developed in Estonia (M. Lotman and M. K. Lotman). The volume also addresses the issue of the relationship between meter and music. In recent work by Hayes and MacEachern (1998), the metrical form of a verse is equated with the way the text is aligned with the musical beats in performance. Kiparsky advocates a greater division between meter and music, and argues that a quatrain of English folk verse has an intrinsic metrical form that is independent of how it is set to music (Hanson and Kiparsky 1996). The quatrain structure is also examined by Árnason, who focuses on quatrains in Germanic verse. Finally, the volume includes papers employing the Quantitative approach to verse (Tarlinskaja,

Friedberg, Hall, Scherr, Youmans) associated with the Russian school of metrics (Bely 1910, Tomashevsky 1929, Taranovsky 1953, Gasparov 1974, Bailey 1975, Tarlinskaja 1976). This approach describes the grammars of poets in terms of their statistical preferences in constructing certain types of lines (for example, lines with stresses omitted in certain positions). Statistical preferences allow us to distinguish the styles of different poets as well as to differentiate literary periods.

The volume is intended for two types of audiences. The first are linguists, including those with a specific interest in poetry, as well as those who work on stress and speech rhythm, phrasing, and the phonology-syntax and phonetics-phonology interfaces. This volume will also be relevant to those concerned with constraint systems and linguistic theory in a general way.

The second, much larger, audience consists of students of poetry and the connection between language and literature. It is only a matter of time before students of literature rediscover metrical analysis. We hope that the presence of scholars whose interests are as much literary as linguistic (Fabb, Youmans), and the wide array of languages covered, will help to make this book of interest to this audience, and will serve to create renewed interest in this area among students of literature.

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1. Music and meter

4

A modular metrics for folk verse*

Paul Kiparsky

1. Introduction

Hayes & MacEachern's (1998) study of quatrain stanzas in English folk songs was the first application of stochastic Optimality Theory to a large corpus of data. It remains the most extensive study of versification that OT has to offer, and the most careful and perceptive formal analysis of folk song meter in any framework. In a follow-up study, Hayes (in press) concludes that stress and meter – or more generally, the prosodic structure of language and verse – are governed by separate constraint systems which must be jointly satisfied by well-formed verse. Apart from its convincing arguments for a modular approach to metrics, it is notable for successfully implementing the analysis in OT, a framework whose parallelist commitments might seem philosophically at odds with modularity.¹

Taking modularity a step further, I argue here that the composer and performer of a song constructs a match between *three* tiers of rhythmic structure: linguistic prominence, poetic meter, and musical rhythm. They are organized along similar principles, as hierarchies of alternating prominence representable by trees or grids. But they are autonomous, in the sense that a text has an intrinsic prosodic form independently of how it is versified (Lieberman and Prince 1979, Hayes 1995), a stanza has an intrinsic metrical form independently of how it is set to music (Hanson and Kiparsky 1996), and a tune has an intrinsic musical rhythm independently of the words that may be sung to it (Jackendoff and Lehrdahl 1983). Moreover, each rhythmic tier is subject to its own constraints. The stress pattern (or other linguistic prominence relation) which determines the intrinsic linguistic rhythm of a song's text is assigned by the language's prosodic system. The meter of its stanzas and the rhythm of its tune are normally drawn from a traditional repertoire of rhythmic patterns. How the tiers correspond to each other, and in what ways they can be mismatched and mutually accommodated, is regulated by conventions that evolve historically, though within limits grounded in the faculty of language.

These are familiar and heretofore uncontroversial ideas, but Hayes' work questions one aspect of them. It equates the metrical form of a verse with the way its text is aligned with the musical beats in performance. I present three arguments against this identification and in support of the traditional division of labor between meter and music. The first argument demonstrates the autonomy of metrical form by showing that constraints on the form of stanzas are invariant across musical performance and melodic variation. The second shows that the modular approach allows major simplifications in the metrical constraint system, and, more importantly, makes them entirely grounded in elementary principles of poetic form. The third argument is that the simplified constraints not only define the occurring stanza forms, but also predict the relative frequencies with which they are used in folk songs. These results vindicate a fully modular view of the metrics/music interface.

Following H&M's lead, I will be using Optimality Theory, which is well suited to model the groundedness of metrical preferences and constraints and their competition within a metrical system. But I argue that variation is better treated by partial constraint ranking (Anttila 1997, 2003) than by stochastic OT.

The core data are also the same as H&M's, namely the ballads and other songs from England and Appalachia collected and transcribed by Sharp & Karpeles (1932) and by Ritchie (1965). For a fuller picture of the variation within this tradition I have complemented the corpus with the versions of the same songs from Niles (1961) and especially from Bronson (1959–72), and with the early 20th century American ballad recordings in the *Folkways Anthology* (Smith 1952/1997). I also drew on Isaac Watts' collection of hymns, a body of popular verse which differs minimally from folk songs in a way which provides an empirical test of a central prediction of my theory.

While delving a little deeper than H&M into the folk song tradition itself, I also narrowed my focus by excluding two more peripheral sets of data, namely H&M's judgments about the well-formedness of their own made-up pieces of verse, and the nursery rhymes with which they sometimes supplement their folk song corpus. H&M introduce their intuitions about constructed verses in order to assess the metricality of quatrain types which their theory predicts but which don't occur, and of those which their theory excludes but which do occur. I simply decided to treat all unattested quatrain types as unmetrical, except where the gap can plausibly be considered accidental,² and quatrain types attested more than once as metrical, letting the

theory adjudicate the status of the singletons. Hugging the empirical ground this way turned out to pay off because the simplest analysis draws the line in almost exactly the right place. This is not to deny that wellformedness judgments have a place in the study of meter. However, in the case of a complex and sophisticated traditional genre of oral literature with its own metrical conventions the intuitions themselves require validation, e.g., by showing that they converge with usage in the clear cases.³

My reason for setting nursery rhymes aside are somewhat different. Their meters are simply too diverse to be entirely covered in the same constraint system as folk song quatrains. A corpus such as Opie & Opie (1997) contains a mixture of almost every popular conventional verse form with simple rhythms similar to those of sports cheers and chanted slogans (Gil 1978, Kopiez & Brink 1998). Selecting from this material without some independent criterion runs the risk of circularity, so the better course is to stick to a homogeneous corpus.

2. The structure of folk song quatrains

2.1. The core generalizations

Hayes and McEachern classify lines into four types on the basis of their rhythmic *CADENCE*, which they define in terms of the grid placement of the final two syllables (p. 476). The four types are **4**, **3**, **Green O** (abbreviated **G**), and **3-feminine** (abbreviated **3_f**). (In the appendix to their paper they recognize other types, such as **4_f**, **5**, **5_f**, **6**; I return to the first of these briefly below.) The following stanza (Sharp & Karpeles 1932, #272A), also cited by H&M, illustrates three of the four types.

- (1) a. I wóuld | not már|ry a bláck|—smíth, (Type **G**)
 b. He smúts | his nóse | and chín; | Ø (Type **3**)
 c. I'd rá|ther már|ry a sól|dier bóy (Type **4**)
 d. That már|ches thróugh | the wínd. | Ø (Type **3**)

The meter is iambic tetrameter in the odd lines, alternating with trimeter in the even lines. Accents mark syllables in the metrically strong positions, which in this simple children's song exactly coincide with the strongest beats of the tune; the dash and Ø are H&M's conventions for marking empty beats.

