

‘Words’ vs. ‘phrases’ as building blocks of poetic metrics
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During the Renaissance, the same source meter spread among different European poetic traditions. The way of implementing the new poetic form varied from language to language, however: roughly, while Romance languages created lines with a fixed number of syllables, Germanic languages preferred a fixed number of feet in a line. This distinction has sometimes been described as a reflection of Romance languages being ‘syllable-counting’, while Germanic languages are ‘stress-counting’. We argue that a different parameter is at play: Romance phonologies are phrase-based (e.g. in their syllabification), whereas Germanic languages are word-based.

The implementation of a new meter. In the early Renaissance period, Dutch and English poets started adopting and adapting French alexandrine (which was itself an adaptation of Italian and Occitan forms). After a few attempts at isosyllabic forms, a new form was developed and spread across poets, namely the iambic meter (Gasparov 1996, Zonneveld 1998). Interestingly, those developments seem to have been largely independent in the two geographical areas. The new poetic form had relatively little in common with the source. In fact, French alexandrine was constituted by twelve syllables. The Dutch meter, instead, consisted of a fixed number of iambic feet, hence, a sequence of alternating unstressed-stressed syllables. An example of the two forms follows:

(1) French alexandrine

*Je vous donne de **moi** la part qui est **meilleure**:
C’est l’esprit et la **voix**, qui, **menés** et **conduits**
Sous le flambeau d’**Amour**, des **éternelles nuits***

(Jean-Antoine de Baïf)

(2) Dutch iambic hexameter (‘alexandrijn’)

*Het **hemelsche** gerecht heft **zich** ten **lange leste**
Ontferremt over **my**, en **mijn** **benauede veste**,
En **arme burgery**; en **op mijn volx** **gebedt**,*

(Joost van den Vondel)

The fact that the change to the new forms in Germanic languages seems almost spontaneous, suggests that there is something in the structure of these languages that makes poetic feet more likely than syllable counting. In order to understand what this is, we need to see that there seems to be a parametric difference between Germanic and Romance languages, and furthermore, we need to refine our idea of what a ‘poetic foot’ is. These two notions will be discussed here in turn.

Prosodic domains. It can be demonstrated that Dutch and French - or, more widely, Germanic and Romance languages - differ in the distribution of phonological processes across their prosodic domains: while most of the phenomena affecting Dutch take place on the level of the phonological word, in French the prominent domain appears to be the phonological phrase (Van Oostendorp 2000). For example, Dutch has word stress and its phonological word is the domain of final devoicing and r coloring. French, instead, apart from having stress occurring at the right edge of the phonological phrase and not on the word level, also presents sandhi phenomena, such as liaison, which are absent in Dutch. An important aspect of the phonological distinction appears to be the domain of syllabification. While Dutch only has word-internal syllabification, which is a shared characteristic among Germanic languages (Nespor & Vogel 1986, Booij 1995), French, like other Romance languages, tends to syllabify within a bigger domain, viz. the phonological phrase (Nespor & Vogel 1986). There thus seems to be a ‘parametric’ difference between languages with

a word-based and languages with a phrase-based phonology. This particular parameter seems to influence many different kinds of phonological decisions.

What are poetic feet? The terminology ‘poetic foot’ suggests that these metrical constituents are parallel with metrical feet (and the latter term is obviously etymologically derived from the former); this is also true for terms like *iamb*, *dactyl* and *trochee*. However, Riad and Golston (1999, 2005) argue for Ancient Greek poetry that poetic feet are actually built *on top of* metrical feet; a Greek dactyl consists of two moraic trochees (with some extra requirements), and the latter are the natural metrical feet of the language. The same can be argued for poetic iambs in Dutch, showing that such constituents are not headed in the same sense as phonological feet, and that they correspond to phonological words, instead.

Proposal. We propose that a combined insight into the parameter of word- vs. phrase-based phonology and the nature of phonological feet gives us a unique perspective into why Germanic languages developed poetic feet. In Dutch and English Renaissance meter, foot is the main element, while in French, the cola is. This is not surprising: Dutch phonology is word-based and therefore also prefers its meters to contain poetic words; colas are on the other hand the poetic equivalents of phonological phrases. By including a typology of meters in other languages, the same parallel can be observed: languages, which use cola as the main metrical level, have a prominent phonological phrase, while phonological word prevails in languages with foot-centered poetry.

We thus claim, that metrical structure is parasitic on the structure and the functioning of prosodic hierarchy: the colon corresponds to the phonological phrase and the foot to the phonological word. One parameter determines both phonological domains and poetic domains. We show that such analysis works better than an alternative which assumes that the relevant parameter is one of syllable-timing vs. stress-timing, as this does not lead to the same typology, and furthermore it is not clear why being ‘stress-timed’ would lead to iambic meters (i.e. strict alternations of stressed and unstressed syllables.)

References

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