

Rhythm Requires Poetic Sections

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This is proposed as an absolute (implicational) universal, and comes from Fabb and Halle (*Meter*): *Where a text has a sustained regular rhythm, it is also divided into sections of determinate length.*

Texts with a regular rhythm (sustained over a long stretch of the text) are called metrical. The rhythm need not be periodic, and can vary; it is regular in the sense that it includes a range of variations which are overall subject to a set of rules. In other words, metres are found in poems, defined as texts which are divided into poetic sections. The following definition is from Fabb.

A poem is a text made of language, divided into sections which are not determined by syntactic or prosodic structure. Such sections are called “poetic sections.”

The universal means that there is no metrical prose. Meter depends on the division of a text into poetic sections – that is, meter depends on the text being poetry. The fact that meter depends on sectioning can be seen also in the fact that metricality is locally sensitive to the edges of sections; the beginnings of lines tend to be metrically looser, the ends of lines metrically stricter. Note that this is unconnected with how the text is written on the page. If we wrote out *Paradise Lost* as prose, the division into sections would still exist (it would still be a poem as defined above), as demonstrated by the fact that a generalization holds that every tenth syllable is word-final.

The universal also distinguishes regular rhythms in language from regular rhythms in music. In music, regular rhythms can be sustained indefinitely over musical sequences which are not divided into sections; in other words, music can be a kind of “metrical prose” (Fabb and Halle “Grouping”).

The explanation of the universal is provided in the Fabb and Halle theory of meter, and is basically that regular rhythms are derived from counting. In this theory, a regular rhythm is produced by rules which control the prosodic structure of the text relative to an abstract representation which is a periodic multi-level grid. The grid is constructed by rules which build the grid from one end of a sequence of syllables (or morae) to the other end of the sequence; each meter is governed by rules which will build a well-formed grid only if the number of metrical syllables or morae fits within a specified range (e.g., for iambic pentameter, the grid can be built for a line of 9, 10 or 11 metrical syllables). Thus in order to produce a regular rhythm, the text must be divided into sections which are of the right length to have a grid constructed from them, i.e., the text must be divided into sections (such as lines) of a determinate length, hence must be poetry and cannot be prose.

This universal combines with the universal controlling the length of the poetic line (Fabb), to produce a derived combined universal: *Where a text has a regular rhythm, it is also divided into sections of determinate length which are short enough to fit into working memory capacity.*

Future Research

There are some cases of what appear to be prose but have forms such as rhyme (e.g., Arabic rhymed prose or *saj'*). The organization of these types of prose is underexplored; it is worth looking for examples of 'metrical' prose in which a regular rhythm is sustained over a long sequence where there is no evidence that the sequence is divided into subsections.

[See also Geoffrey Russom, "Comments on Fabb, 'Rhythm,'" and Nigel Fabb, "Response to Russom."]

Works Cited

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Response to Russom, 'Comments on Fabb'

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These very interesting comments raise some difficult issues, to which I offer partial responses as follows.

- 1 The definition of "poem" is taken from Fabb (*What is Poetry?*). It covers metrical poetry, nonmetrical but parallelistic poetry, and free verse. Its goal is to differentiate most poetry from most prose, but it has some blurred boundaries: for example it does not fit prose poems, and it holds at a small scale – ordinary prose can be divided into paragraphs, chapters etc. which are larger sections not determined by syntactic or prosodic structure. So it is intended as a useful but not strict (or universal) definition; its purpose is to draw attention to the fact that where poetry has regular added forms such as metre, rhyme, alliteration or parallelism, these added forms are dependent on poetic sections. Because prose lacks these kinds of section it also lacks the poetic forms. (Furthermore, as I argue in another entry, the poetic sections on which the forms depend are short enough to fit into working memory.) Poetic sections – such as metrical lines – can have boundaries which coincide with linguistic constituent boundaries; in some traditions, this is strictly enforced, while in others it is not. That is, there is definitely the possibility of a regular (perhaps statistically predictable) relation between poetic sections and

linguistic constituents. The point of the definition is that the reverse is not true; that is, there is no generalization that a specific type of linguistic (syntactic or prosodic) constituent is always coincident with a poetic section; if that was the case, then people would be talking poetry whenever they spoke and there would be no prose.

- 2 As noted in the comment, there are apparently meters which enumerate words. Hebrew (Carmi 60-62) offers examples, and Rumsey argues that the PNG language Ku Waru has word-counting meters. If words, rather than some prosodic element inside words, are being counted in these meters then they fit the Fabb and Halle approach, which is not committed to phonology determining meter, better than the Kiparsky approach. But also if these are just counting meters and there is no control of rhythm, then these 'word counting' meters are like syllable counting meters, or mora-counting meters, or Korean *sijo* in which accentual phrases are counted. As such, these purely counting meters fall outside the scope of the universal, which look not at counting as such, but at the relation between counting and rhythm (in the sense of a pattern of prosodically differentiated units).
- 3 Lerdahl and Jackendoff showed that music has various kinds of hierarchical structure, of which (musical) metrical structure is closest to the rhythmic organization of metrical verse. However musical metrical structures are not subject to an upper bounding in length; for example, if the music is in 3/4 time, we do not in general find a kind of requirement relating to the metrical structure itself that every four bars form a distinct section. The organization of the musical sequence into sections is Lerdahl and Jackendoff's 'grouping structure', a hierarchical organization into motives, phrases and sections which is distinct from but can be systematically related to the metrical structure: they are 'independent but interactive'. Grouping structure is one of a range of kinds of hierarchical grouping structure in cognition (as Lerdahl and Jackendoff point out, and an area in which they were pioneers; for general discussion see Cohen). Other kinds of grouping include event segmentation (Radvansky and Zacks). One of the characteristics of all these kinds of grouping is that there is no inherent limit on their maximal size; they are not measured or counted out. (Though Lerdahl and Jackendoff do have a rule against very small groups.) But metrical structures in poetry are made from a controlled number of elements with a lower and upper bound; in this, they are unique. Note that nothing prevents musical grouping being organized numerically, or prose being organized numerically (and Hymes argued that some folk tales were organised into counted groups); but this is optional not obligatory. Grouping structure in music is a bit like division into paragraphs and chapters in a novel; it is a kind of hierarchical grouping with no inherent limit on maximal size. It is unlike lineation in metrical verse.
- 4 Finally, a comment on the Fabb and Halle theory of meter. This shares with all theories of meter the view that a metrical line is attached to a hierarchical metrical representation (whether tree or grid, close variants of one another), with rules which relate the prosodic phonology of the

line to the metrical representation. Theories differ in the extent to which the metrical representation is determined by the phonology of the line, or is autonomous of the phonology; the Fabb-Halle theory tends more (but not completely) to the latter. We focus more than other theories on how the representation is built (and in our theory, also transformed). Our specific contribution is to note that the metrical representation is controlled in its size by non-linguistic principles; a meter such as iambic pentameter counts ten syllables (or five times two syllables) – but no linguistic rule can count higher than two or perhaps three. This is the basis of the universal which I propose, which means that there are upper limits on the size of metrical sequences. This is not inherent to the Kiparsky theories which focus on local relations between small metrical constituents such as feet and short sequences of syllables, though the setting of a limit is derived (in a different way) by Golston and Riad.

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