

## NEW METHODS IN LITERARY LINGUISTICS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE STUDENTS

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NIGEL FABB

Nigel Fabb is Professor of Literary Linguistics and head of the Department of English Studies at University of Strathclyde; an editor of *Journal of Linguistics*; the author, co-author or co-editor of eight books, including *Linguistics and Literature* (Blackwell 1997), *Language and Literary Structure* (Cambridge 2002), *Ways of Reading* (Routledge, 3rd edition 2005), and with Morris Halle the forthcoming *A Treatise on Metre*.

### Getting precise about rules and variations: working with poetic metre.

*I will begin by discussing the standard 'foot combination and substitution' approach to metrical analysis, exemplified for example by Fussell. I will suggest that in both cases, the representation is too close to the surface rhythm of the verseline; instead a categorial distinction must be made between metrical rules and rhythmic variation. This categorial distinction is made in the generative metrics tradition, of which the most recent version is Bracketed Grid Theory (Fabb & Halle). This simplifies the representation of the metrical line (an advantage for teaching), but requires some other explanation for the actual rhythms, the variations and tendencies which are found in English verse. I will show how a pragmatics (relevance-theory) based approach to these is appropriate and usable in teaching students how to work with metrical verse.*

## A. Some definitions

**verse** = a text which is divided into lines

**line** = a section of a text, which in most traditions has distinctive characteristics (which might include fixed length, final rhyme, metrical irregularities of different kinds at beginning and end; section usually respects word boundaries and sometimes higher syntactic boundaries)

**metrical verse** = verse in which the lines are measured.

English metrical verse is of two types

(a) **strict** = number of syllables in the line shows minimal variation, and there is a tendency towards a regular binary or ternary rhythm. Examples include **iambic pentameter** (the metre of sonnets, of *Paradise Lost*), other iambic, trochaic, anapaestic and dactylic metres.

(b) **loose** = number of syllables in the line shows much variation, and there is usually a fixed number of stressed syllables (three or four) in the line. Characteristic of ballads, Blake, Coleridge 'Christabel', etc.

## B. Traditional accounts of metre relate it to spoken rhythm

Conceptual basis: the fundamental problem for a theory of meter is *to explain rhythm*.

(1)

Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
 From morn to night, my friend. 4

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
 A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.  
 May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 You cannot miss that inn. 8

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
 Those who have gone before.  
 Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
 They will not keep you waiting at that door. 12

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
 Of labour you shall find the sum.  
 Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
 Yea, beds for all who come. 16

[Rossetti 2001,59.composed 1858 published 1862]

(2) 'template' for iambic pentameter, where x = unstressed syllable, and / = stressed syllable.

x / x / x / x /

(3) 'templates' for other metres

x / x / x / x /	iambic tetrameter; iamb = x /
/ x / x / x / x	trochaic tetrameter; trochee = / x
x x / x x / x x / x x /	anapaestic tetrameter; anapaest = x x /
/ x x / x x	dactylic dimeter; dactyl = / x x

### APPROACH 1 TO METRE: template-matching

template-matching as a way of understanding metricality (the basis of most generative metrics treatments, eg. Hanson and Kiparsky; but not Bracketed Grid Theory)

(4)

Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
 x / x / x / x / x /

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 x / x / x / x / x /

### APPROACH 2 TO METRE: foot combination and foot substitution

division into feet (conceived of as building blocks of the metrical line, cf. Fussell; and permitting foot substitution)

(5) foot types (terminology drawn from classical metrics)

x / iamb  
 / x trochee  
 x x / anapaest  
 / x x dactyl  
 x x pyrrhic  
 // spondee  
 / x x / choriamb  
 / x x x first paeon

(6)

Does the road wind uphill all the way?			
x x /	/ /	x /	x /
anapaest	spondee	iamb	iamb

May not the darkness hide it from my face?				
x /	x /	x /	x /	x /
iamb	iamb	iamb	iamb	iamb

C. Rossetti, 'Uphill', lines 1 and 7

## C. A linguistic account (Bracketed Grid Theory): the gap between metre and rhythm

APPROACH 3 TO METRE: Bracketed Grid Theory (*refs.* Fabb, Halle, and Fabb & Halle)

Conceptual difference: the fundamental problem for a theory of meter is *how to count*.

Counting is achieved by building a grid. (In this theory, counting in pairs or triplets only.)

(7)

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*)  
 ^ insert

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*)  
 ^ skip

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*) \* \*)  
 ^ insert

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*) \* \*)  
 ^ skip

(8) *Definition of foot / metron / colon*

A foot (or metron or colon) is a sequence of one or more asterisks preceded by a left parenthesis or followed by a right parenthesis.

(9) *The rules for iambic pentameter; these rules build a grid from the line.*

- a. Project each countable syllable as an asterisk on gridline 0
- b. Moving from right to left apply the following steps iteratively [at gridline 0, forming feet]
  - i. Insert a right parenthesis to the right of an asterisk
  - ii. Skip an asterisk

- c. The rightmost asterisk in each foot is the head of the foot and is projected up to the next gridline.
- d. Moving from right to left apply the following steps iteratively [at gridline 1, forming metra]
- i. Insert a right parenthesis to the right of an asterisk
  - ii. Skip an asterisk
  - iii. Skip an asterisk
- rider: the final metron constructed on gridline 1 is binary
- e. The rightmost asterisk in each metron is the head of the foot and is projected up to the next gridline.
- f. Moving from left to right apply the following steps iteratively [at gridline 2, forming cola]
- i. Insert a left parenthesis to the left of an asterisk
  - ii. Skip an asterisk
- g. The leftmost asterisk in each colon is the head of the foot and is projected up to the next gridline.

(10)

May not the darkness hide it from my face?											
*	*)	*	*)	*	*)	*	*)	*	*)	gridline 0	feet
	*		*)		*		*)		*)	gridline 1	metra
			(				*		*	gridline 2	cola
			*							gridline 3	

(11) *Condition* [general condition for all the English strict metres]

A maximum must project to gridline 1.

(12) *Definition of maximum* [general definition for all the English strict metres]

The syllable carrying primary stress in a polysyllabic word, which is preceded and followed in the same line by a syllable which does not carry lexical stress, is a maximum.

A line is metrical in iambic pentameter if (a) it can have a well-formed grid built from it by the rules in (9) and (b) the condition (11) holds of the relation between the line and the grid.

(13) Just gridline 0 and unbracketed gridline 1 shown here:

*Up-Hill*

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

\* ) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

Yes, to the very end.

\* \*) \* \*)\* \*)  
\* \* \*

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

From morn to night, my friend.

4

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \*

But is there for the night a resting-place?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

You cannot miss that inn.

8

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \*

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

Those who have gone before.

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \*

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

They will not keep you waiting at that door.

12

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)\* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \* \*

Of labour you shall find the sum.

\* \*)\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \*

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)\* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \* \*

Yea, beds for all who come.

16

\* \*) \* \*) \* \*)  
\* \* \*

## D. Characteristic complications in counting: English iambic pentameter

(a) missing syllable at the left end of the line = short initial gridline 0 foot (see above, giving one syllable less in the line); explained by building structure at gridline 0 from right to left.

(b) extra syllable at the right end of the line = unfooted asterisk, explained by reversing the order of skip and insert steps.

(14)

Break, satin-tinted, downy as the feather

s	s s	s s	s s s	s s	s	
*	* *	* *	* * *	* *	*	*
						^ skip
*	* *	* *	* * *	* *)	*	*
						^ insert
*	* *	* *	* * *	* *)	*	*
						^ skip
*	* *	* *	* * *)	* *)	*	*
						^ insert

Break, satin-tinted, downy as the feather

s	s s	s s	s s s	s s	s	
)*	)*	)* *	)* * *)	* *)	*	*
	*	*	*	*	*	
						gridline 0
						gridline 1

(c) extra syllables within the line. Explained by not projecting them. (Most such syllables fall into phonologically definable groups, eg. syllables with nasals, rhotics, laterals in the coda; but not all do.)

(15)

And stared at the Pacific - and all his men

s	s	s	s s s s	s	s	s	s
*	*)	*	*) * *)	*	*)	*	*)

## E. Implicit and explicit knowledge of metre

Interpretive resemblance as the basis of an inference. (Sperber and Wilson).

(16)

(a) The line "May not the darkness hide it from my face?" has a rhythm x/x/x/x/x/ [strong]

(b) If a line has a rhythm x/x/x/x/x/ then it is in iambic pentameter. [strong]

---by *modus ponens*---

(c) The line "May not the darkness hide it from my face?" is in iambic pentameter. [strong]

(17) *Interpretive use*

(a) The line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" has a rhythm xx///x/x/ [strong]

---is an interpretation of---

(b) The line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" has a rhythm x/x/x/x/x/ [weak]

(18)

(a) The line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" has a rhythm x/x/x/x/x/ [weak]

(b) If a line has a rhythm x/x/x/x/x/ then it is in iambic pentameter. [strong]

---by *modus ponens*---

(c) The line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" is in iambic pentameter. [weak]

Other inferences which strengthen the conclusion that the line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" is in iambic pentameter. Here, for example, as a premise it is strengthened by fitting with a strong second premise and a strong externally validated conclusion.

(19)

(a) The line "Does the road wind uphill all the way?" is in iambic pentameter

(b) If a line is in iambic pentameter then it sounds like normal speech. [strong]

---by *modus ponens*---

(c) This line sounds like normal speech. [strong]

## F. When generated and communicated forms are not the same

English 'sapphic' metre. Horatian sapphic has the quantitative pattern:

```
- u - - -:u u - u - -
- u - - -:u u - u - -
- u - - -:u u - u - -
- u u - -
```

Later Latin sapphics develop into a stressed pattern of

```
/ x x / x : / x \ x / x
/ x x / x : \ x / x / x
/ x x / x : / x / x / x
/ x x / x
```

Attridge (1974:212)

(20) By BGT the following stanza is iambic pentameter, systematically exploiting two permitted variants (initial stress and extra final syllable)

```
Constables came up for to take me into
) * *) * *) * *) * *) Δ
      *      *      *      *      *
```

```
Custody; they took me before the justice;
) * *) * *) * *) * *) Δ
      *      *      *      *      *
```

```
Justice Oldmixon put me in the parish-
) * *) * *) * *) * *) Δ
      *      *      *      *      *
```

```
-Stocks for a vagrant.
) * *) * *) Δ
      *      *
```

George Canning with John Hookham Frere

'Sapphics. The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-grinder' 1797 )

But it mimics a sapphic line, and hence communicates that it is in sapphic long line meter.

(21)

(a) The line "Constables came up for to take me into" has the rhythm /xx/x/x/x/x.

(b) If a line has a rhythm /xx/x/x/x/x then it is a long line in a sapphic stanza.

==

(c) The line "Constables came up for to take me into" is a long line in a sapphic stanza.

## References

[for a fuller list of relevant articles etc. by Fabb and by Halle, see  
<http://homepages.strath.ac.uk/~chcs03/FHmetricsbibl.html>]

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