

Principles of Prosody



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Stress-Timed vs Syllable-Timed Languages

(1) \times / \times \times / \times \times / \times / \times
(1) The hills are alive with the sound of music

(2) \cup \cup / \cup \cup /
(2) Sur le pont d'Avignon

The Foot 1/2

(1) $\begin{array}{cccccccccccc} & \times & & / & & \times & \times & / & & \times & & \times & & / & & \times & / & \times \\ \text{The hills} & | & \text{are alive} & | & \text{with the sound} & | & \text{of music} \end{array}$

(2) $\begin{array}{cccccccc} \cup & \cup & / & \cup & \cup & / \\ \text{Sur le pont d'Avignon} \end{array}$

The Foot 2/2

A repeating pattern of syllables.

Table 1: The definition of the foot for various metrical types

Metrical Type	Definition of the Foot	Example
Quantitative	The foot is a pattern of long and short syllables	Latin
Syllabic	No feet; lines have a fixed number of syllables irrespective of syllable length or stress	French
Accentual	The foot comprises a single primary stress along with any associated syllables of no or weaker stress	Old English
Accentual-syllabic	The foot comprises a single primary stress as well as a specified number of syllables of no or weaker stress.	Modern English

Common Feet in Modern English Verse

- ▶ Trochee: /x
- ▶ Iamb: x/
- ▶ Dactyl: /xx
- ▶ Anapest xx/

Feet and the Verse Line 1/2

- ▶ Trochaic trimeter: three falling feet to a line, one unstressed syllable per foot
- ▶ Iambic tetrameter: four rising feet to a line, one unstressed syllable per foot
- ▶ Anapestic pentameter: five rising feet to a line, two unstressed syllables per foot

etc.

(3) × / × / × / × / × /
Those petty wrongs that liberty commits

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 41* l. 1

WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE TITLES
WITH THE RIGHT SYLLABLE STRESS PATTERN
TO BE SUNG TO THE TUNE OF THE ORIGINAL
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES THEME SONG

ACE VENTURA: PET
DETECTIVE

EDGAR ALLAN POE MUSEUM
ENGINE FAILURE AFTER TAKE-OFF
ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

BIGGEST LOSER: SECOND CHANCES
CAYMAN ISLAND BLUE IGUANA
CENTRAL TEXAS POCKET GOPHER
CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST CREATOR
CLIMATE CHANGE AND MEAT PRODUCTION
CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON
DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME IN CHINA
DENVER AIRPORT PEOPLE MOVER
EASTER ISLAND SPINY LOBSTER

ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS

Figure 1: XKCD, “*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*,” detail; CC-BY-NC Randall Munroe

Classical Modern English Verse Lines 1/2: Iambic Pentameter

- ▶ x/x/x/x/x/
- ▶ Imported from Italian by Chaucer
- ▶ When unrhymed, referred to as “blank verse”

(4) $\begin{array}{cccccccc} \times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\ \text{When} & \text{forty} & \text{winters} & \text{shall} & \text{besiege} & \text{thy} & \text{brow} \end{array}$

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 2* l. 1

Classical Modern English Verse Lines 2/2: Ballad Metre (Common Metre)

- Iambic tetrameter (x/x/x/x/) alternating with iambic trimeter (x/x/x/), in four-line stanzas

(5) x / x / x / x /
There is a house in New Orleans
 x / x / x /
It's called the rising sun
 x / x / x / x x x /
It's been the ruin of many a poor girl
 x / x / x /
Great God, and I for one

The House of the Rising Sun, ur-text, verse 1

Is Iambic Verse an Odd Choice for a Root-Stressed Language?

- ▶ Germanic stress is on the root syllable

Is Iambic Verse an Odd Choice for a Root-Stressed Language?

- ▶ Germanic stress is on the root syllable
- ▶ Loan words sometimes follow the stress pattern of the source language
- ▶ Germanic phrases often begin with an unstressed element such as a preposition, adverb, or prefix

Words and Feet 1/3

Modern English metres are syllable-counting metres, but unstressed syllables are not always strictly counted:

- (5) × / × / × / × /
There is a house in New Orleans
 × / × / × /
It's called the rising sun
 × / × / × / × × × /
It's been the ruin of many a poor girl
 × / × / × /
Great God, and I for one

The House of the Rising Sun, ur-text, verse 1

Words and Feet 2/3

Modern metres frequently assign stress to syllables that are not normally stressed in speech:

(6) \times / \times / \times / \times / \times / \times /
Let **me** not **to** the marriage **of** true minds

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116* l. 1

Thus the iambic foot is not always a perfect match for English prosody.

Words and Feet 3/3

In modern iambic verse, feet often begin or end mid-word:

(7) $\begin{array}{cccccccc} \times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\ \text{When} & \text{for} & \text{ty} & \text{win} & \text{ters} & \text{shall} & \text{besiege} & \text{thy} & \text{brow} \end{array}$

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 2* l. 1

(8) $\begin{array}{cccc} \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\ \text{They} & \text{call} & \text{the} & \text{ri} & \text{sing} & \text{sun} \end{array}$

The House of the Rising Sun l. 2

Thus the iambic foot is not always a perfect match for English prosody.

(See further the video on Words and Feet.)

Caesura

Any metrical pause, usually suggested by the phrasing (i.e. between syntactic constituents).

- In Old English verse, required between the on-verse and the off-verse, and visualized in print as extra space:

Oft Scyld Scēfing ↓ sceapena þrēatum
monegum mǣghum ↑ meodosetla oftēah,

Beowulf 4–5

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↑

- In Bliss's system, each *verse* also has two “breath-groups” (i.e. feet) separated by a caesura, while each compound has a less marked “pseudo-caesura”:

Oft | Scyld Scēfing || sceapena | þrēatum
monegum | mǣġþum || meodo:etla | oftēah, *Beowulf* 4–5

Enjambment

In modern verse, any non-occurrence of a metrical pause between verse lines, as suggested by the syntax (and typically by the absence of punctuation at line-end):

- (9) × / × / × / × / × /
Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 × / × / × / × / × /
Admit impediments. Love is not love
 × / × / × / × / × /
Which alters when it alteration finds,

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116* ll. 1–3

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Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 × / × / × / × / × /
Admit impediments. Love is not love
 × / × / × / × / × /
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Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116* ll. 1–3

Not as useful with reference to Old English verse, but here

- ▶ Verse boundaries show a certain syntactic integrity (e.g. do not end in a preposition)
- ▶ Foot boundaries coincide with word boundaries (if a compound is counted as two words)

Any transgression of these tendencies is called a **bracketing mismatch**. (Russom §1.5.2)

Bibliography

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