

Principles of Prosody



P. S. Langeslag



Stress-Timed vs Syllable-Timed Languages

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

(2) Sur le pont d'Avignon

The Foot 1/2

(1) The ^x [/] hills | ^x ^x [/] are alive | ^x ^x [/] with the sound | ^x [/] ^x of music

(2) [˘] [˘] [/] Sur le pont [˘] [˘] [/] d'Avignon

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

Feet and the Verse Line 2/2



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) ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / When forty winters shall besiege thy brow

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 21*. 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) There ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / is a house in New Orleans

It's ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / called the rising sun

It's been the ^x / ruin of many a poor girl

Great ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / 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 ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x /
is a house in New Orleans

It's ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x /
called the rising sun

It's been the ruin of many a poor girl
^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x / ^x /

Great God, and I for one
^x / ^x / ^x / ^x /

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) 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:

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  sceafena þrēatum
monegum māgħum  meodosetla oftēah,

Beowulf 4–5

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  sceafena þrēatum
monegum māgþum  meodosetla oftēah, *Beowulf 4–5*

- ▶ 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 || sceafena | þrēatum
monegum | māgþum || meodo:setla | 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

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

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

Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th ed. Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015.

Russom, Geoffrey. “General Principles of Poetic Form.” In *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry: From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter*, by Geoffrey Russom, 1–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.