

ICEHL 21

Report on Workshop # 4:

The Evidential Value of Verse vs. Prose in the Historical Reconstruction of Speech

There were four presentations on the interaction of meter with the phonology and prosody of the language at composition time. The chronological span covered almost the entire history of the language: Old English, Middle English, the 15th-century, Victorian English, with emphasis on continuities in each case.

Our report includes summaries of the papers in the order in which they were presented. Please get in touch with individual presenters for handouts, questions, bibliographical reference, and suggestions.

The program:

Christopher McCully (University of Essex) cmccully@essex.ac.uk:

“Raiding the demotic: verse as evidence for speech prosody in Old and Middle English.”

This paper suggests that the relationship between relative prominence in the standard configurations of OE half-line and that of compounds and (in particular) syntactic phrases isn't isomorphic. This lack of relationship is seen in half-lines such as e.g. *ðæt [mihtig God]* (Beo. 701a), where the phrase is end-stressed but where the poetics assign most prominence to the initial syllable of *mihtig* (and where /m/ participates in the alliteration of the line). This lack of relationship is further scrutinized here to include reconsideration of linguistic right-headedness and its relationship with isochrony in earlier period of English together with a note on the perceived need for analysts to revisit questions concerning *literary prestige* and the *literacy* needed (or not needed) to generate alliterative verse. Finally, the paper suggests ways in which Anglo-Saxon poets were both sophisticated (in allowing mismatching of constituents in order to avoid metrical monotony) and linguistically rapacious.

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“Phonological Persistence across Metrical History: Resolution in “Strong-Stress” Meters of 19th c. English.”

Within literary studies, recent decades have seen renewed interest in literary “form”, and research into cultural histories pertaining to forms, but not so much research into forms themselves. Without the latter, and the engagement with linguistics that they depend on, the former are sometimes misunderstood.

For example, recent cultural histories of 19th c. British meter (Hall 2011) have explored rivalries between “accentual” and “quantitative” meters, and have interpreted Saintsbury’s (1910) rejection of “pure” forms of either in favor of forms that strike his “ear” as true expressions of the “genius” of the English language as “nationalistic”. Saintsbury may or may not be nationalistic, and is certainly less than explicit; but his examples suggest an argument that is linguistically sound. Accent and quantity have never been entirely separable in the English language, and rarely in English meter. Their relationship is evident in “resolution” -- at its most general, equivalence between a stressed heavy syllable (‘H) and a stressed light syllable together with a following unstressed syllable (‘LL), or in some cases any unstressed syllable (‘LH). How their relationship is manifest, however, varies across meters, and how it is formalized depends on the theory of meter.

This paper describes the meters of a cluster of poems of Tennyson that Saintsbury singles out, arguing that the role of resolution in them supports his point. Any meter is assumed to consist of an abstract rhythmic template together with correspondence rules for how language may (or may not) be mapped into the template; the rules refer only to authentic phonological properties, but regulate only some of them, leaving others free (Hanson and Kiparsky 1996). From this perspective, Tennyson’s (1880) translation of the Old English *Battle of Brunanburh* shows his awareness of Old English meter and the role of resolution in it. Around the same time, he composes three other battle poems described as “masterpieces” by Saintsbury, “The Revenge”, “The Battle of Lucknow”, and “The Voyage of Maeldune”, as well as a brief inscription intended for “Cleopatra’s Needle” when the obelisk was installed in London. These poems are all in different meters, with different templates, rules, cultural references and themes. Yet in all of them, resolution plays a role in some crucial correspondence rule.

This is possible, and perceptible, it is argued, because resolution itself is an expression of an authentic phonological property, a version of the moraic trochee identified by Hayes (1987), figuring in the grammar of both Old English and modern English (Hanson 1991), as well as in the grammars of many languages around the world.

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“What poetic metre can tell us about sound change: new evidence for the history of vocalization of fricatives (*HIGH*, *SLY*, etc.)”

This paper drew attention to the unusual behaviour of two adjectives in the metre of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower in particular. Building on existing scholarship by Michael Samuels, David Burnley and Donka Minkova, the paper began by explaining the *regular* system in Chaucer and Gower: monosyllabic adjectives take syllabic final –e when they are grammatically weak or modify plural nouns in attributive position. The paper then demonstrated on the basis

of many examples that *high* and *sligh* often break this rule. Both Chaucer and Gower repeatedly did not pronounce final *-es* after *high* and *sly* (and scribes often did not write them either). One explanation is that the loss of the final palatal fricative in the uninflected form undermined the formal distinction between uninflected ‘heigh’ and inflected ‘hye’. This explanation, suggested by Burnley, is probably at best a partial one. The broader context for the irregularity of ‘high’ and ‘sligh’ is the vulnerability of final *-e* after /i:/. The vacillation between /i:/ + syllabic schwa and monosyllabic /i:/ was shown to be a broader phenomenon, also affecting, for instance, French nouns (*chivalryë* v. *chivalry*) and verbs (*cryëden* v. *criden*). The paper ended by suggesting that it was changes in the language that gave Chaucer and Gower the option to pronounce or not to pronounce final *-e* in the exceptional cases of *high* and *sly*. Donka Minkova described the general situation very well in the final summing up she gave at the end of the session: verse phonology is the ‘phonology of opportunity’, and the optionality of final *-e* in grammatically weak *high* and *sly* a great example of how poets such as Chaucer and Gower exploited that ‘phonology of opportunity’.

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“From prosody to meter and back: the 15th century evidence reconsidered”

In an attempt to fill the 15-century gap in the records of prosodic developments, the paper focusses on Lydgate’s verse as evidential source for pre-1700 stress shifts in functional diatones (*présent*, n. adj. vs. *présént*, v.). The diatonic model is testable in OE verse for prefixed items: *ætstælle* ‘location’ vs. *ætstōp* ‘stepped’; there is no clarity on whether *présent*, - *présént* is a continuation or an innovation. Seeking for answers in Lydgate was marginally revealing: *conduct*, *record*, *subject* and a few more do behave as in Modern English. The sally into 15th meter encounters huge analytical problems: elision, syncope, apocope and other variables complicate the correspondence between the verse design and the prosody (syllables, stress...). The next step is to assign weights to the distributional probability of each type of decasyllabic scansion.

All papers paid close **attention to detail**, and all speakers agree that metrical revelations can only proceed from careful first-hand examination of apparently small similarities and contrasts and can in fact lead to specification of something like a metrical idiolect, e.g. differences between Chaucer and Hoccleve, OE and Tennyson. While it would be too early to identify ‘forensic metrics’ it does appear – following and developing five decades of work in the field, starting perhaps with Kiparsky (1977), Hayes (1983) – that a form of ‘metrical fingerprinting’ is now possible, i.e. even in poets that are metrically broadly similar, a Gower or Hoccleve can differ from a Chaucer in measurable ways.

The presentations responded to the theme of the Workshop by attending closely to both metrical theory and the relationship between **literacy and (constraints on) verse design** (e.g. are sophisticated metrical fixes such as resolution in OE part of the equipment of a literate poet or can the same fixes apply in spontaneous, oral composition?) While we will continue to debate these questions, it is important to put in the mix both solid linguistic reasoning and statements concerning cultural **metrical prestige**: Latin (throughout) and (subsequently) ON verse models must have been known to the 'art' poets of Anglo-Saxon England just as French, Italian and Spanish models would have been known to later medieval writers, yet we know little about why or how prestige, 'art' verse from other languages impacted (or did not impact) English, particularly in the earliest phases of its literature; compare that to linguistic borrowing, where we know a great deal about the directionality of the process...yet we have no comparable statement of the direction of metrical borrowing(s).

Not least, the theme of 'continuity' was very prominent: The **historical persistence** of some features of English phonological (vocalization), phonotactic, and stress organization (resolution in Tennyson, compound and phrasal stress patterns) was highlighted in every paper, confirming the shakiness of our inherited *strict* periodization. Donka Minkova brought out the common strands in a final summing up at the end of the session.

The session ran as smoothly as any Zoom meeting, i.e. small technical glitches, nothing seriously disruptive.

Attendance was between 16-21, a good mixture of established scholars and graduate students. Post-Workshop exchanges were positive and opened interesting opportunities for networking.

What's next: publication plans.