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Meter

The formal features that typically mark poetic texts against normal discourse are called meter. This word may refer to recurring patterns of stress and other prosodic features or, in a wider sense, include also alliteration, rhyme, etc.

Meter is studied as an explicit system of rules in most literate societies where poetry is esteemed as a literary-aesthetic genre, even though elements of versification are learned explicitly as well in some non-literate communities such as the Dinka in southern Sudan, where young men are taught how to compose and perform different kinds of poems during the retirement that precedes initiation. However, the most frequent case is for meter to be absorbed unconsciously from exposure to performances of metrical texts, just as children learn how to form grammatical utterances through their exposure to surrounding speech. Epistemologically metrical patterns have thus some similarities to phonemes vis-à-vis the actual sounds uttered and heard in human speech. They can be viewed as sets of allowed variants, as psychological realities, or as abstract patterns whose relationship with the actual metrical texts is accounted for by means of derivational rules, etc. At any rate, three levels have to be distinguished ideally in a metrical text: (1) the metrical pattern, (2) the concrete text, as an abstract reality, and (3) the actual performance of the text. For instance, the text of a song conforms to a metrical pattern, but may be performed in many different ways. Written versions of it lie somewhere between (2) and (3) because they often represent features such as elisions, etc., that properly belong to its performance rather than to the form of its text required by meter.

The most general characterization of meter is as "recurring patterns in successive sections of the text," in Foley's words. In many traditions this involves phonological parallelism that consists segmentally in rhyme, alliteration, or assonance (respectively, similarity between final, initial, and internal sounds of words), with the addition of rarer types, such as the constraints on syllable-initial consonants in Moroccan Berber versification

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described by Jouad. Yet cultures differ in the role they assign to each of these three major kinds, and in how they are realized. For instance, they were optional in classical Greek versification, whereas rhyme is mandatory in most western European systems since the late Middle Ages. In the latter systems, alliteration and assonance are sometimes used in order to achieve special effects but are not constitutive of meter. In early Germanic and modern Somali, instead, alliteration is mandatory, while rhyme and assonance occur only occasionally. The alliterating sounds changed after each line in medieval Germanic poetry but are the same through all the lines of a poem in modern Somali. Prosodic parallelism usually also involves numerical regulation, as John Lotz pointed out. For instance, some systems require the lines in a text to have a specified number of syllables, as in classical Chinese or Japanese. In other systems heavy or light syllables have to occur in specific, numerically definable positions in a text section, with heaviness vs. lightness being realized as closed vs. open syllables, long vs. short, etc., according to the phonological makeup of the language, as in some Turkish systems and, respectively, Somali and Classical Greek. Still other systems (e.g., many western European ones) require stress to occur in certain positions or in certain numbers within a text's sections, or even rely on tones, as classical Chinese poetry does.

Other kinds of parallelism that play a constitutive role in some versification systems are grammatical and lexico-semantic parallelism. Grammatical parallelism may consist in recurring morphological patterns, as in some Uralic (e.g., Cheremis) and Native American systems, or in recurring syntactic patterns, as in poetry from the ancient Near East such as Biblical Hebrew or Ugaritic. For instance, Stanislav Segert points out that verses in Ugaritic poetry generally consisted of two cola (i.e., cohesive stretches), with the first colon "followed by a second colon exhibiting identical, similar or complementary syntactic structure but replacing some words." Lexico-semantic parallelism matches words or phrases in paired sets, so that one element is replaced with its pair in the following relevant text section. It is pervasive in many traditions, from Finnish to classical Chinese and Sumbanese in eastern Indonesia. In ancient Near Eastern poetry the paired terms were synonyms, opposites, complementary terms (e.g., "orphan" vs. "widow"), or expansions of each other (e.g., "wine" vs. "blood of vines").

Cultures differ in the genres for which they use metrical regulation. Even in some literate societies (e.g., in Western Europe), meter does not characterize only literary poetry. Songs, nursery rhymes, and children's counts also conform to meter, and not infrequently also proverbs, charms, advertising jingles, and political slogans. Looking a little further away, one finds old Germanic law texts in meter to prevent alteration, eastern Indonesian ritual languages characterized by meter for political or marriage negotiations, historical narratives, communicating with spirits, divination. Among the Somali, meter also characterizes riddles, curses, and ritual praises; the Afar ginnili's prophecies are usually metrical.

Even though metrically regulated texts and everyday discourse are prototypically quite distinct, intermediate cases are also known. Among the most common ones are (1) genres with optional or partial metrical regulation

and (2) metrical prose. Examples of (1) are proverbs that in many cultures may optionally have partial or full metrical parallelism between their parts. For instance, while many English proverbs lack any metrical organization, the well-known "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" has two strong stresses preceded by one or two weak positions in each of its two halves (*an Apple a dAY / keeps the dOctor awAY*), alliteration (*day-doctor*), and rhyme (*day-away*). Examples of (2) can be found in classical Latin prose texts by Cicero and other authors, with metrical closes at the ends of sentences, or in the Arabic rhymed prose of the first and last suras of the Koran.

When metrically regulated texts are performed orally, the musical organization is quite often linked to the metrical pattern, as when musical ictuses coincide with strong stresses in accentual verse systems, or when the span of the melodic contour matches that of a line or group of lines.

Metrical systems change through time—for example, because a language has lost phonological oppositions relevant in its older metrical system, such as vowel length. Metrical systems may also be borrowed from one linguistic tradition to the other, just as linguistic phenomena can be. It is important to point out, however, that the ensuing systems may be double-tiered, with the older metrical type surviving in some genres, and the new or borrowed type used in other ones. An instance of this is the survival of old Germanic alliterative strong-stress verse—with the addition of rhyme—in the above English proverb. Another one is Hungarian, in which the strictly syllabic verse of its older "national" system is used beside the Greco-Roman quantitative verse of its "higher" nineteenth-century poetry.

(See also *improvisation, music, oratory, poetry, prayer, repetition, style*)

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