

Ethics Statement

This tool, which looks for ways to fit Latin text to a poetic meter, was intended as a benign tool for academic and recreational use. Poetry, after all, is typically seen as non-dangerous, and verse in a dead language still more so. Nonetheless, this tool does come with a few risks and opportunity for abuse, ranging from the consequences of producing misleading output to violations of academic integrity to the use of Latin poetry for harassment. Control of this tool's distribution is the best way to prevent these hazards from causing real problems.

On the positive side, this tool is meant to reduce the tedium of manually testing different permutations of a sentence to see if it fits a meter, a trying process for inexperienced Latin poets who have not developed an ear for meter. Furthermore, humans tend to lose track of what possibilities they have or have not tried, leading them to waste time testing the same permutation of words multiple times or completely miss other permutations that might match the desired meter. An algorithm could, in theory, be both faster and more accurate than a human in this matter. Additionally, such an algorithm could also be used for larger-scale research into Latin poetry or automatic "metrification" of entire corpora.

Unfortunately, in its current state the metrifier falls far below the human gold standard for accuracy and completeness. An unsuspecting user who put their trust in the tool would very likely be misled by its output into believing that either no metrical permutations of a sentence exist or that a non-metrical phrase is actually a valid line of poetry. Even if the tool could reliably determine whether a metrical re-ordering of a phrase exists, users would also have to be wary of changes in nuance, grammar, or semantics from the original phrase to the metrical phrase - despite Latin's flexibility, order does matter sometimes.

Next, if the tool worked properly, it would make life easier for aspiring Latin poets, including Latin students with composition assignments. If some students had access to this tool and others did not, the ones with access might have an unfair advantage (or disadvantage, as the case may be), and using the tool could be considered "cheating" in these cases.

Finally, as any student of classical poetry knows, verse can be weaponized. The Roman poet Catullus, in particular, is known for his well-metered tirades against his enemies, in which he threatened to perform all manner of unpleasant sexual acts on them as revenge for their slights. Even Catullus's less-hateful poems, which also frequently overflow with eroticism, could be fairly harmful if used for sexual harassment. In the hands of an amoral Latin student, a decent metrifier could be used to generate a highly-offensive arsenal of verse.

The best way to deal with these issues is to control the distribution of the metrifier. If it is treated like a typical class project and forgotten in some folder somewhere, then it can cause no harm. Alternatively, if it were to be distributed to more people, the safest and most responsible course of action would be to make it publicly accessible online, along with clear explanations of what it can and cannot do. Though this would increase the chances that the metrifier might fall into the hands of a miscreant, it would give professors and teachers a better chance to adjust to

its existence, and would also give users advance warning before they put too much trust in the software.