Poetics Exercise 4: Iambics in everyday text

Overview:

Blank verse has been called, semi-accurately, the ideal meter for natural speech. It worked for Shakespeare. How often does natural speech just happen to fall into this five-beat pattern? The twitter bot [pentametron](mailto:https://pentametron.com/) uses—it appears—some of the basic rules we’ve encountered in both Glaser and Sowards’ metrical guides: lexical stress (primary stress in polysyllabic words) must fall on even (S) positions. If that is the only rule we really care about (debatable), it seems enough tweets are “in” iambic pentameter to generate rhyming couplets at a steady pace (I don’t know how steady). Even blues lyrics might fall into this pattern: “I hate to see the evening sun go down…”.

Do **both** parts:

Part One:

Find two examples of iambic pentameter in a prose / speech source (the news, something you overheard, prose fiction or non-fiction. Type these out, ideally in context (the full sentence). Scan both lines, noting any ambiguities, tensions, or places where you need to squish two syllables together (over 🡪 o’er; in a). These are called elisions and resolutions (the difference doesn’t matter right now).

For example, the opening paragraph of *A Wrinkle in Time*:

“It was a dark and stormy night. In her attic bedroom Margaret Murry, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sat on the foot of her bed and watched the trees tossing in the frenzied lashing of the wind. Behind the trees clouds scudded frantically across the sky. Every few moments the moon ripped through them, creating wraithlike shadows that raced along the ground.”

It was a dark and stormy night. In her

W S W S W S W S W S

[Very regular except the final syllable + the enjambment]

Behind the trees clouds scudded frantically

W S W S W S W S W S

[again, regular until the last syllable]

Every few moments the moon ripped through them

W S W S W S W S W S

[this one has many stress mismatches but is still metrical]

**Your lines here:**

Part Two:

Do your best to imagine a set of instructions which you might either hand code, or prompt engineer, that might lead to a program or AI capable of scansion. Or teach a human. Several of these exist, and we will be exploring one. But they are sometimes quite complex! In the case of AI, it is mostly impossible to know how they are scanning. So let’s begin with your own speculative algorithm for scansion. There are many right answers to this. Or perhaps no right answer, but we can get started.

**Your instructions here:**