Introduction: Verse structure and linguistic modelling

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'[The study of poetic metre: McC] flourishes by its own strength, and those who follow it appear to be sustained, unwearying, by their own will and appetite for it. They do not seem to care whether anyone listens to their teaching; they seldom listen long to one another.'

(W.P. Ker reviewing Vol. 1 of George Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody. Scottish Historical Review* Vol. IV, 1907: 114-15.)

Judged by activities at conferences and symposia over the last seven years there has been renewed interest in the study of metre (often called 'verse prosody' or '(historical) metrics') by linguists and others professionally interested in describing the forms of both earlier and - less usually - later verse. The English language, with its intricacy, its long history of use as a literary medium and its spectacular formal developments in both verse and prose, figures largely in these renewed descriptions and analyses. There have been, for example, symposia on metrics at the University of Essex (2015), the University of Stockholm (2018) and most recently, a special session on historical metrics at the International Conference on English Historical Linguistics in Leiden (ICEHL, 2021). Academic publishers, too, have over the same span brought out major new titles devoted to matters historical and metrical – Russom (2017), Donoghue (2018) and Duffell (2018) would here be representative – and it does not seem coincidental that in the UK, the Poet Laureate has been busy of late translating *The Owl and the Nightingale* into contemporary English (Armitage 2021) – a work that accompanies the same writer's earlier re-rendering of *Gawain and the Green Knight* (2009).

The session held at ICEHL 2021 is germane to the present undertaking because many of the analysts whose work on metrics is represented in this issue contributed severally and jointly to that proceeding. The broad theme of the ICEHL session was the extent to which metrics can – or cannot – provide evidence useful for linguistic reconstruction…which begs the questions 'what sort of evidence?' and 'reconstruction of what, precisely?' The title of the present issue attempts to capture both the underlying breadth of the enquiry ('verse structure') but also the specificity of all historical linguistics, yet more specifically still, what interested those contributing to that ICEHL session were the *interactions* between verse structure ('metre') and language structure ('prosody'), both as evidence for earlier states of English and as a testing ground for current phonological theory as it relates to verbal art and musical text-setting. The rhythmic patterns of metre, the rules that make the measuring units of verse transparent,

mnemonic, and replicable, are grounded in those linguistic patterns familiar to poets and their audience. When native speaker responses to the acceptability of specific language patterns are unobtainable, hypotheses about the structure of the ambient language have to draw on other material sources, which for earlier English are the surviving manuscripts. The data in the manuscripts are never free from the additional complications arising from linguistic contacts, scribal and editorial practice, the clash between or the convergence of oral tradition and literary canon. That makes the data particularly challenging – but also of greater interest.

The difficulties of reconstructing and modelling speech are many and obvious; one enduring debate in English and cross-linguistically, is whether verse data are better as instantiations of speech than prose data, granting that data reliability will vary depending on the target language level, the texts' chronology, register, source, codicological history. For Old English, by way of a brief illustration, the statistical balance between verse and prose records is very heavily in favour of prose,[1] and major contributions to reconstructing earlier English often draw only on prose, see Hogg (1992: 8) who explicitly states, 'The above discussion [of OE dialects] generally excludes poetry'. Studies of OE syntax commonly keep prose and verse separate: under the rubric of 'How to handle data' Fisher et al. (2000: 31) state that 'There seems to be general agreement that data from prose sources reflects the language of speakers most closely,'[2] while others (Pintzuk and Kroch 1989) attribute differences not to genre, but to

[1]The documentation in the *OE Dictionary Corpus* (https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/) shows that the word count for verse (177,480) amounts to only 5.9% of the total word count for verse, prose, and glosses (3,005,867)

[2] They also recognize (2000: 69), that in Middle English 'poetry makes use of a wider range of grammatical options, including more informal ones, than prose, but a great deal of more fine-grained work remains to be done in this area.' It might be noted that Donoghue (2018)

'normal' processes of syntactic change. Campbell (1970) looks for the indebtedness of Old English prose to verse, and one particular type of prose record, charter boundaries, have been described as 'the texts with the best claim to record Old English vulgar speech' (Kitson 1992: 50). Colman (1992) is an important collection of studies addressing the material and theoretical bases for the reconstruction of Old English, but it addresses all types of philological material, and only two of the papers there deal evidence from poetry.

The claim to primacy of prose evidence for historical morphosyntax does not undermine the authority of verse evidence; metre remains a vital testing ground for the resources available to the speakers and the way these resources are selected by the poets. Since metrical properties such as rhythmic alternation, syllable division and syllable count, onset and coda identity in alliteration and rhyme, are acquired early and without special training, metered verse can be taken as the closest approximation of the poets' or copyists' internalized language. Not surprisingly, then, poetry is always a key candidate for testing theoretical approaches, especially in phonology, not surprisingly valued highly in the 'consumer guides' to evidence in phonology (Ohala 1986, Van Oostendorp 2013).

Turning specifically to the contents of this issue, all contributors are not only acutely aware of how a language's users experiment with a range of patterns in order to achieve aesthetic effects but are also aware of the evidential value of such experiments to linguistic historians, sociolinguists and historians of change in and development of literary cultures. Sometimes the results of these analyses can be surprising. Hayes, for example, working on the

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also cautions that neither the relationship between OE prose and the spoken language, nor that between poetry and prose, are straightforward and helpfully points out two specific problems with the commonplace assumption that verse is 'conditioned prose' – see in particular Donoghue 2018: 89-91.

coinages in the children's books of Dr. Seuss and reviewing the literature on phonaesthemes, cites a study by Oh et al. (2020) which indicates that even if they do not speak a second language, speakers may have tacit knowledge of the phonotactic principles of that second language if they have second-hand exposure to it. Hayes suggests that in the United States of the post-WW2 era, when German Americans formed the largest minority ethnic group in the country, sufficient speakers of American English 'could have internalized a sense of what German phonology [was] like' (p.ref.) and thereby have been able to identify coinages such as *Schlottz* as 'a German-like word'. Developing this theme of phoneasthetic identification and function, Hayes analyses how phonaesthemes may provide evidence for how many words originated as phonaesthetic coinages ('the work of … speakers long forgotten') – coinages put into the service of verbal folk art. This analysis emphasises the relationship between aesthetic pattern and vernacular speech and implies that professionally creative users of a language – that language's poets, prose writers and translators, for example – make special use of available linguistic structures in order to develop and maintain what is (in Hayes's words) a distinctive vernacular style – or indeed, styles. To paraphrase Hayes's conclusion, poets rely on phonological resources shared with their reading (or listening) communities; the study of metre, and the evidence provided by that study, can reveal the nature of those resources with particular clarity.

In something of the same way and with the same attention to detail, Putter analyses the inflectional system of adjectives in Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve, with reference to the adjectives 'high' and 'sly'. The metrical evidence provided by these adjectives, which frequently appear line-internally without the expected inflectional *-e* in Chaucer and Gower, and which appear to be almost wholly uninflected line-internally in Hoccleve, suggests that poets of the period were responding in slightly different ways to the English language as it was changing around them – changing not only in terms of its phonology but also in its grammatical system

(since monosyllabic adjectives were inflected with *-e* in their weak and plural forms). Such a view also bears of course on the editing of medieval texts, because as Putter notes in his conclusion, 'editorial emendations of Hoccleve's poems based on disyllabic *hye* in weak adjectives should be rejected' (p.ref.)

    If Hayes works in this volume with phonaesthemes and Putter analyses (among other matters) inflectional syllables, Ryan develops an analysis of what evidence textsetting provides for the form and perception of syllables ('textsetting' here used analytically within the framework first developed by Hayes and Kaun 1996). When syllables are set to music or are chanted, heavy syllables are likely to align with what are metrically strong positions, thus (to re-use Ryan's example here) in *'Twas in **Oxford town***ship *I **lost** my **way*** the boldened syllables – all of them heavy – align with metrical beats, whereas in *'Twas in **Ox**ford <u>ci ty</u> I **lost** my **way*** the textsetting of *city* might indicate that the syllables of that word are disposed across the available timing slots within the line in a way different to the syllables of *township*. This matter then bears on how speakers perceive not only syllable weight but also the isochronic organisation of English – where we use the cover term 'organisation' to include both the production and (probably more importantly) the perception of strings of syllables as isochronic. Further, Ryan shows that the evidence available from textsetting strongly suggests that while categorical concepts such as 'heavy' or 'light' syllable are useful as general terms, more fine-grained prosodic analysis reveals that the perceived weight of syllables in textsetting 'is based not on the rime, syllable, or vowel-to-vowel interval, but rather on the p-center interval' (Ryan, p.ref.), where 'p-centre' abbreviates 'perceptual centre'. Ryan notes, for instance, that 'singers do not generally seek to align the beginnings of syllables with beats, but rather their p-centers, which are closer to the beginnings of nuclei' (p.ref.) – and so here again, verse-prosodic analysis may provide evidence not only for how language users perceive (and may aesthetically deploy) constituents of the phonology but also for how those constituents are perceived within a

relativised temporal framework. That issue seems to be a particularly current concern for analysts whose concern is contemporary urban folk verse, see e.g. Gilbers 2021, who provides an intricate analysis of forms of rap.

Further developing the theme of how language users perceive and may make aesthetic use of the linguistic structures available in a given period, McCully (p.ref.) re-analyses the isomorphism that may have existed in Old English (OE) between rules of right-edge phrasal prominence in speech and relative prominence of constituents within the half-line and line of alliterative verse. Recent theories of OE metrical prominence, particularly those of Russom (Russom 2017 and earlier works) show that many normative OE half-lines have a structure which can be adequately described without making reference to right-edge prominence. As McCully elaborates, that very adequacy is a challenge to metrists since well-known eurhythmic phenomena of promotion (of erstwhile weaker syllables to relative stress position within the verse line) and demotion (of erstwhile stressed syllables to relatively less-stressed positions) depend crucially on phrasal right-headedness (specifically, the promotion of underlyingly unstressed syllables to what is perceived as a relatively stressed position, as in the following, where back and to and subject to optional but nevertheless highly likely rhythmic promotion: *he handed **back** his medal **to** the boss*). If that right-headedness didn't exist in OE, where did it originate? And if it *did* exist in OE, why didn't poets then make use of the metrical opportunities the language afforded? McCully's work here shows that revisiting and studying isomorphism (or the lack of it) between the forms of language and of verse may reveal something noteworthy not merely about the relationship between language and verse but about English poetic history more broadly considered.

That same poetic history is a key topic in Russom's contribution to this volume. Central to Russom's re-analysis of Kuhn's Laws is an account of the change in earlier periods of English between patterns of word-order. In main clauses, whereas today the default pattern is

Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), in *Beowulf* SOV order is unmarked within the domain of the half-line. Russom's conclusions depend on a re-analysis of the nature and function of Kuhn's Laws – particularly, the role and placement of *Satzpartikeln* ('sentence particles' – light elements of structure such as some pronouns, sentential adverbs and conjunctions and finite auxiliaries). Russom argues that such elements are disposed by rules of poetic metre which are distinct from – and obscure the effects of - rules governing basic word-order in prose. Nevertheless, *Beowulf* appears to have been composed at a time when Old English was moving from the underlying SOV word-order it had inherited from proto-Germanic and moving (in those constituents Russom defines as 'small phrases') towards the later SVO pattern. That re-analysis (see also our remarks below, together with Zimmermann's and Minkova and Zhou's contributions to this volume) in Russom's theory cuts outward, not only into the evidence verse prosody can provide for diachronic syntactic and phonological change but more broadly still, into the relationship between metre and language *tout court*. To take but one issue from that last context: it is widely assumed – so widely that the assumption is uncontroversial – that metre involves to a greater or lesser extent a stylisation of patterns already found at a particular time within a given language. Daunt (1946) embodied that assumption in her well-known remark that OE metre was essentially the spoken language 'tidied up'. Yet any analyst should not only ask about but also formulate a more precise statement of the relationship between metre and language. Russom does that here by developing a universalist theory of metre whose first principle is that 'metrical constituents are abstracted from constituents of the language' and whose second is that 'norms for metrical constituents are abstracted from norms for the corresponding linguistic constituents' (Russom, this volume, pp.xx-yy). Not only is it of theoretical interest that under the terms of this second principle, constraints are ranked in a way familiar from Optimality Theory, but also Russom's universalist principles show much more clearly how in Old English – to re-employ Daunt's metaphor – the relevant tidying up was done.

Zimmermann's contribution here (p.refs.) also focuses on the evidence poetry can provide for the OV to VO shift in a later period of language evolution, in Middle English (ME). Drawing on evidence afforded by the *Penn Parsed Corpus of Middle English* (Kroch and Taylor 2000) and a supplementary new resource, the *Parsed Corpus of Middle English Poetry*, Zimmermann re-analyses the timings of the relevant syntactic change and (allowing for the fact that poetry is more conservative than prose) suggests that its end point falls considerably later – well into the 15th century - than previous studies have claimed. Turning specifically to the value of the evidence provided by the metre, Zimmermann shows clearly that poetry provides crucial evidence for syntactic structure and change at a time – c.1250-1350 – when there is a gap in written prose records so substantial as to preclude safe generalisations, on the basis of that limited evidence, about wider linguistic developments. In that context, Zimmermann (p.refs.) here shows how the analysis of poetry can 'reduce the risk of erroneous generalisation', give a 'more complete picture' of dialectal variation, and provide 'more realistic quantitative estimates' of factors influencing syntactic change. Zimmermann's view of the relative lateness of the final establishment of VO word-order is arrived at with remarkable precision and just as Russom's metrical (re-)analysis cuts out into wider theoretical concerns, so too does Zimmermann's, offering new perspectives on the perceived weight of syntactic elements, the nature of extraposition, processes of archaisation and niche survival, and indeed on how innovative syntactic structures can be learned at all as well as on those constituents from which they start to spread – specifically, do main clauses or subordinate clauses lead the way in establishing VO patterns as default ones?

If linguistic change is an abiding concern of all papers in this volume, all contributors recognise of course the inevitability of linguistic continuity – and thereby, the theoretical challenge provided by such persistence. Minkova and Zhou address this challenge directly by re-considering stress contrasts in diatones – pairs such as *óutlaw* (noun) vs. *outláw* (verb). Are

such contrasts inherited from OE or are they an ME innovation? Minkova and Zhou note a gap in the evidence available to verse prosodists and historical linguists, one stretching for about 150 years after Chaucer, but unlike Zimmermann (who uses evidence from verse to reconstruct word-order patterns), Minkova and Zhou turn to evidence from word-stress as that is manifest within poetry to supplement the analytical narrative of prosodic structure as that existed in the 15th century: 'art verse remains the most promising source of prosodic information diachronically' (p.ref*). More specifically still, given that scribal practice varies, OE verse provides the most reliable evidence of the stress status of prefixes – morphemes which play a key role in Minkova and Zhou's reconstruction. From a reconsideration of evidence from OE, Minkova and Zhou broaden their analysis and discussion so as to provide a survey of philological source material found within the *Dictionary of Old English*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. This reconsideration yields limited support for the idea that diatonic patterns inherited from OE persisted in the ME period; at the same time, English lost some heavy and in principle stressable prefixes and that change is accompanied by a spread in the productivity of the unstressable prefix *be-* (*betray*, *begrudge* and many other items – all stressed on the root). Again, data from prefixed Romance/French loan-words suggest that between 1200 to 1500 there was 'consistent lexical pressure to model verbs as a sublexicon with noninitial stress' - a factor which ultimately bears on the changing stress system of English over the same period…and beyond. Based on this array of evidence, Minkova and Zhou here articulate the position that 'native', Germanic patterns of word-stress (with primary word-stress on the leftmost syllable of the lexical root) persist longer than had been thought in earlier phonological literature. Eventually (in Minkova and Zhou's analysis, as late as the 17th century), the factors bearing on the stressability or otherwise of native and borrowed prefixes – these include the spread of unstressable native prefixes, the extrametricality of all

borrowed monosyllabic prefixes in ME and later, the increased exposure to stress-attracting suffixation – overwhelm the native, 'left-strong' stress principle.

In providing new data based on the stress of – more precisely, the prefixation and derivational morphology of - native and borrowed words, Minkova and Zhou help to fill the gap in understanding noted in Hoffmann (2020), who notes that previous analyses of the principles of English derivational morphology obtaining at the time Chaucer was writing were insufficiently detailed. Here once again is an area of study where prosody can reveal much more about how poets heard and were able to use the materials of the language they creatively exploited – and do so with much more accuracy than was possible at the time Ker (see the epigraph here) was reviewing the first volume of George Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody*.

For all the progress represented in this issue there are still major theoretical challenges for linguistic historians and prosodists to confront. Minkova and Zhou show for instance (and explicitly acknowledge) that the matter of the history of English stress is far from settled. Another area where more work needs to be done is in analysis of testimonies of writers – specifically, on the cultural legacy afforded by medieval and early Modern English treatises, essays and/or handbooks on the art of making poetry. That is, poets themselves often have interesting things to say about how they make their verse. One contemporary of Chaucer, for example, is Eustache Deschamps, a friend and colleague of Chaucer's. Deschamps wrote a first-handed account (*L'art de dictier*, 1392) of song, lyric poetry and the distinction between the two. For Deschamps it was the default case that short lyrics were almost invariably sung but he noted the new – new in Continental Europe of that time – phenomenon of poetry that was recited. (Presumably the coming of such verse correlated with the prior emergence of a literate, courtly and/or clerkly class of readers.) So Chaucer's ballades, for instance, are examples of a 'high style' in the novel form of recited verse: Chaucer got the stanzaic form and 'high' diction

of those ballades from Deschamps, whose *L'art de dictier*, incidentally, has to our knowledge only once been translated into English and which has never, again to our knowledge, featured in the literature of historical linguistics as that bears on English verse prosody. (Significantly, Deschamps doesn't appear in the index or bibliography of Duffell 2018.) This observation bears on text-setting, and the relationship between the sung and the recited. Both have a cultural and historical dimension and could be claimed as a (relatively) new topic for exploration within historical metrics – as would the careful, cross-linguistic work necessary for a plausible reconstruction of the contexts in which earlier forms of poetry and its audiences existed. Among other things, the existence of such poetic treatises, and the cultural contexts in which they appeared, suggest that verse prosody needs a form of sociolinguistics; Deschamps' work might also urge a writer or reader to consider the Hayesian distinction between 'art verse' and 'song verse' as rather over-simplified (this matter is touched on in e.g. Duncan 2013). In such a context of reinterpretation, that archetypally medieval form, the carol, might also be worth re-examining from the point of view of text-setting.

Finally, it is to be noted that the work offered here concentrates largely on historical metrics as that is manifest in the period that spans Old through to early Modern English – a period in which there are swingeing linguistic and cultural changes. Later forms of verse – the verse produced by a Pope, a Wordsworth, a Tennyson, or later still, the work represented in all the varieties of *vers libre* and *vers libéré* – are not represented in this issue and with some notable exceptions, are not yet widely discussed in historical linguistic terms. Martin (2012) makes the point that 'prosody' has meant many things to many different writers, cultural groupings, theorists and educationalists – these are referred to as 'multiple metrical cultures' in Martin (2012: 10) – and that point is well taken if we regard historical linguists' reconstructions of stress and verse prosody as contributions to a much wider re-imagining of history and culture. In that re-imagining it seems necessary that verse prosodists working on

English, who so often seem to have Klaeber's *Beowulf*, an edition of Chaucer's *Collected Works* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* open on their desks, should begin to engage with a much wider range of both primary and secondary materials. To take just one example of such possible engagement: in any Optimality-theoretic account of metrical verse one high-ranked constraint will be that of *counting*: in a well-formed metrical line, syllables are counted, beats are counted or metrical positions are counted. That was the case in OE alliterative verse; it was so for Chaucer and for Shakespeare. It is so today for metrical verse. While for most poets working in Anglo-American traditions writing and publishing in forms of free or freed verse is now commonplace, at least some contemporary English poets are not only re-working the past (see our remarks above on Armitage's recent translations of *Gawain* and *The Owl and the Nightingale*) but are experimenting with new models such as the work of Oulipo, a group – or if one hesitates to call it a group, a loose association - founded by Raymond Queneau in 1960 (*Ouvroir de literature potentielle*, 'Workshop of potential literature', see http://oulipo.net/). While in principle open to the random, the arbitrary and even the (apparently) irrational, Oulipo practitioners experiment with *contraintes* ('constraints', see http://oulipo.net/fr/contraintes as well as Mathews and Brotchie (eds.) 2005 and Terry (ed.) 2019), many of which are drawn from a repertoire that spans several different manifestations of *counting* – lipograms, for example, or palindromes, or the Oulipian snowball, where text is constructed in which each line is a single word, and successive lines one letter longer. One couldn't wish for a more graphic or contemporary illustration of the significance of counting as a poetic procedure nor of the relationship between metrically universal, and universally productive, principles of counting and closure. Yet to our knowledge, no historical linguist or verse prosodist has to date begun to examine how Oulipo acquired prestige within the English-speaking world, nor how its constraints map into or diverge from those linguistic constraints that will be familiar to many readers of this issue.

Analysis of this contemporary matter seems just as important and exciting as analysis of those French or Italian prosodic models from which Chaucer developed the English pentameter and may reveal something further about how poets and other writers ransack the past, the present and their own and others' languages for apparently innovative models - yet ones whose constructive procedures remain profoundly the same.

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