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Canadian Journal of Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique 54(2): 401–415, 2009

Review Article: Meter in poetry

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École des Hautes Études en Sciences Humaines (EHESS-CNRS),
Paris

Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle.
2008.

Meter in poetry: A new theory
. Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press. Pp. x + 297.

Meter in poetry

(MIP) presents a unified account of the meters used in the world's

poetic traditions. According to Fabb and Halle (F&H), all poetry is made up of lines

and the defining feature of metrical poetry is that it involves restrictions on line length

(p. 273). The aim of the book is to provide a general framework within which to characterize

the various ways in which lines are measured and patterned in the world's

poetic traditions. The general outlook of MIP

is that of generative linguistics. Just as

a linguistic theory is a theory of grammatical well-formedness, a theory of meter is

a theory of metrical well-formedness. As its title indicates,

the book deals only with

meter, not with versification in general; topics such as rhyme,

alliteration, and stanza

structure are touched upon only to the extent that they are relevant to the discussion of meter.

Works with comparable theoretical goals have appeared in the past, notably Chapter 3 of Halle and Keyser (1971), Kiparsky (1977), Hayes (1983, 1989), Prince (1989), Hanson and Kiparsky (1996), Golston (1998), and Golston and Riad (2000).

These were all of article size and none of them dealt with more than a few poetic traditions.

MIP

's empirical coverage is incomparably more vast. Here are the main

headings of the table of contents: "A theory of poetic meter" (pp. 1–43); "English strict meters" (pp. 44–66); "English loose meters" (pp. 67–93); "Southern Romance" (pp. 94–132); "French" (pp. 133–152); "Greek" (pp. 153–185); "Classical Arabic" (pp. 186–213); "Sanskrit" (pp. 214–237); "Latvian" (pp. 238–250); "Meters of the world" (pp. 251–267); "The metrical poetry of the Old Testament" (pp. 268–284).

I thank David Hill and an anonymous reviewer for suggesting improvements; shortcomings are my sole responsibility.

Caveat lector

: in a footnote the authors of the book thank this reviewer for help with Chapter 5, which deals with French.

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Canadian Journal of Linguistics / Revue canadienne de linguistique 54(2), 2009
The headings above give only a limited idea of the range of

poetic traditions covered. Chapter 4 actually deals with Spanish, Italian, Galician-Portuguese, and the Saturnian verse of Latin.

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Other languages/traditions discussed in the book are the Judeo-Spanish poetry of the Middle Ages (p. 208ff.), Bedouin Arabic (pp. 251ff.), Hass

an

aya Arabic (pp. 253ff.), Chinese (pp. 255ff.), and Vietnamese (pp. 259ff.).

The system presented in

MIP

was foreshadowed in earlier publications, notably Halle and Keyser (1999) and Fabb (2002). But the book is self-contained. The work-

ings of the theory and the facts that the theory purports to explain are presented with

remarkable clarity. The discussion can be followed by anyone familiar with linguistic arguments and with sequential derivations.

According to

MIP

a meter is a set of rules and conditions. Here is how these rules

and conditions operate in order to assess the metricality of

a sequence of words. Taking that sequence as an input, the rules apply sequentially to construct a metrical grid. The conditions then check the resulting scansion—that is, the composite object consisting of the linguistic string and the grid. If the scansion meets all the conditions, the input linguistic sequence is deemed to conform to the meter under consideration.

Example (1) outlines the derivations for checking whether two sequences are well-formed trochaic tetrameters. The sequences are Pléasure néver is at home and Pléasure is néver at home

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(22a), p. 15, and (26), p. 19). The first is a well-formed trochaic tetrameter, but the second is not.

(1) a. Pléasure néver is at home. b. Pléasure is néver at home.

RULES

Pléasure néver is at home.

(* * (* * (* * (* 0

(* * (* * (1

(* * (2

* 3

CONDITIONS

yes

RULES

CONDITIONS

yes

Pléasure is né ver at home.

(* * (* * (* * (* 0

(* * (* * (1

(* * (2

* 3

1

This chapter was written by Carlos Piera of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, in collaboration with Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle.

²
The acute accents indicate lexical stress, not explicitly marked in F&H's presentation.

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Revue canadienne de linguistique / Canadian Journal of Linguistics 54(2): 401–415, 2009

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