

Meter as a mnemonic device

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Poetry is an expression of language comparable to music: besides linguistic structures such as syntax and semantics, it is also characterized by a special “rhythm” provided by the devices of meter. Such devices are linked to phonology and, therefore, to prosody (Vogel & Nespor 2007). Throughout the history of humankind, it has always been intuitive that rhythmic structures can help information settle down in long term memory. In every culture, we find songs and poems that have been transmitted for centuries without a written support, but just relying on memory (Rubin 1995). The importance of the surface form for this kind of material is confirmed by studies comparing the ease of recalling material for prose and poetry (Tillman & Dowling 2007).

In our study we aim at investigating the role played by meter devices in long term memory. We consider these devices as examples of schemata that, by creating regularities, facilitate the recall of verses. What is exactly the strength of each metric device? We chose passages from the Divine Comedy, which employs metrical schemata widely familiar to Italians. We manipulated three main schemata: rhyme, pattern of accents and number of syllables. We used non-words in order to eliminate semantic effects. The experiment includes two phases. The first encourages participants to encode and retain something in memory by listening to four 9-verse passages several times. The following day the material is presented tachistoscopically and they are asked to remember a specific non-word per passage.

We hope that this study, particularly once extended to ERPs, will help understand how memory for poetic material works from a neurocognitive point of view, where the notion of schema has already been very influential.

References: • Nespor, M. & I. Vogel. 2007. *Prosodic phonology*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter • Rubin, D. C. 1995. *Memory in oral traditions*. Oxford: OUP • Tillman, B. & W. J. Dowling. 2007. Memory decreases for prose, but not poetry. *Mem. Cognit.* 35. 628–639.