

Text-setting and quantitative meter

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How is a metrical text fitted to a song or chant? In stress-based meters, such as that of English, text-setting generally respects lineation, but otherwise subordinates meter to phonological prominence (Halle and Lerdahl 1993). The overarching constraint is that stressed syllables should be aligned with Strong musical beats, regardless of whether they fall in Strong or Weak positions in the verse.

In quantitative meters, on the contrary, the treatment of syllable weight does not show a comparable asymmetry between meter and text-setting. A possible explanation is that syllable weight is a paradigmatic contrastive property, whereas stress is a hierarchical syntagmatic property.

Like phonological constraints, metrical constraints and text-setting constraints come in stringency hierarchies. For example, the exclusion of stressed syllables from W(eak) positions, categorical in text-setting and in some accentual meters, context-dependent and/or frequentistic in others, is always more rigorously enforced for polysyllabic words than for monosyllables. This can be modeled Optimality-theoretically by adding to the general constraint against stress in W a constraint against polysyllabic word stress in W. Similar stringency hierarchies have been recently shown to underlie the typology of quantitative and accentual-quantitative meters (Ryan 2017, Kiparsky 2018).

This talk presents ongoing work on syllable weight in text-setting, based on analysis of Hausa songs, Urdu ghazal performances, and several Finnish musical genres. The evidence suggests that alignment preferences are better predicted by saliency than by phonological contrastiveness.

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