

Poetry: Rhythmic- Acoustic Dimension

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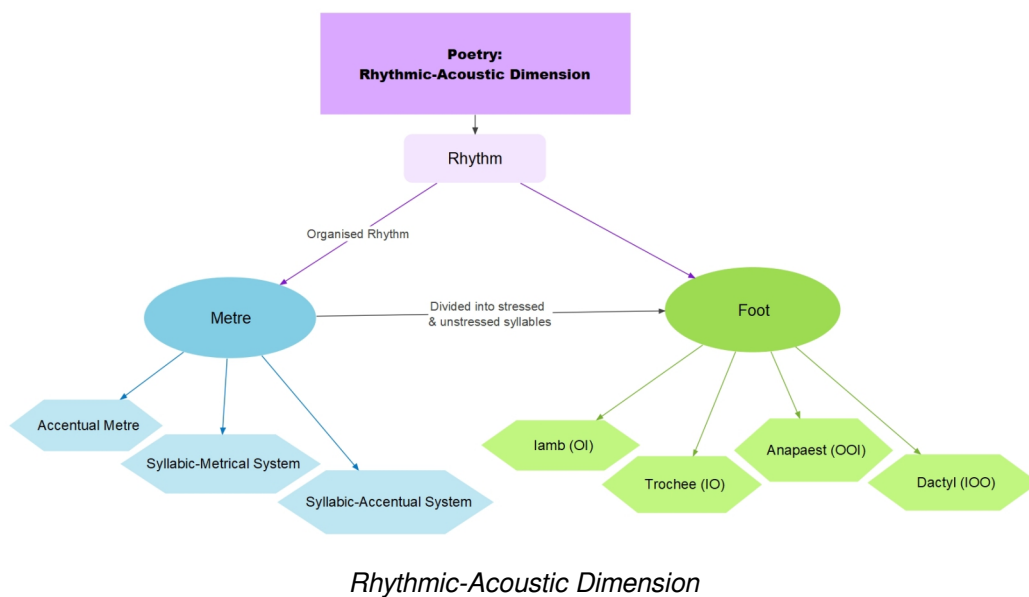
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Introduction

Studying the rhythmic-acoustic dimension in poetry means studying the **prosodic features** in a poem. The meaning of the term “prosody” changes according to the field that it is used in. In Latin, *prosōdia* means the accent or stress in a syllable. In Greek, however, *prosōidia* is to set a song into music.

From a linguistic perspective, prosody refers to the **stress pattern** and intonation in language. In poetry, prosody is used to indicate the form and the sound in which poetry is written. Prosodic features in poetry deal with the form of each stanza, the division of verses, the number of syllables in each verse, and the way stress is used in each syllable.



I What is Rhythm?

As long as poetry is meant to be performed orally, it relies heavily on sound (i.e., syllables and stresses). The sound that results from reading a poem is called “rhythm.” In poetry, rhythm is indicated through stressed and unstressed syllables in a verse and the variations of intonation. Rhythm resembles beat in music.

Note

*When rhythm is repeated and organised it is called ***metre*** (or meter).

II What is Metre?

A metre is **measured** and counted arrangement of accents (stress) and syllables in poetry. While we speak, we unconsciously stress certain syllables and unstress others. In poetry, stress creates regular metric patterns resulting by that in three types of metre.

1. Accentual Metre

This type of metre is determined by the number of stressed syllables regardless of the total number of syllables in each verse. Accentual metre is one of the simplest and oldest poetic measures in English. It goes back to the period of Old English poetry (500-1100) as it is used in poems like Beowulf. Also, Accentual metre is commonly used in **nursery poetry** and folk ballads.

In the late 19th C, the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) revived the use of this type of metre and he called it "sprung rhythm." The medieval accentual metre is similar to the recently used system in rap poetry.

Example

*Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have the wish I wish tonight*

=> The example above is a nursery rhyme from 19th century America poetry. Each line of the poem has four stressed syllables.

2. Syllabic-Metrical System

In contrast to the accentual metre, this type of metre has a fixed number of syllables in each line but not the same number of stresses. Each verse is named after the number of syllables it contains using Greek numbering. For example, hepta-syllabic for seven syllables, decasyllabic for ten syllables and so on.

Example: *Considering the Snail* by Thom Gunn

The snail **pushes** through a green
night, for the grass is **heavy**
with **water** and meets **over**
the bright path he makes, where rain

=> The poem has seven syllables in each line while the number of stressed syllables is varied.

3. Accentual-Syllabic Metre

Is the most commonly used type of metre in English poetry. In this metrical system, the number of syllables and the number of stresses is the same in every verse. This type of system is derived from the metrical pattern of classical poetry (Greek and Roman) and was famously used by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Example: *Lord Byron's She Walks in Beauty* (1814)

One **shade** the **more**, one **ray** the **less**,
Had **half** **im**pair'd the **name**less **grace**

=> Each line of Byron's poem has eight syllables and four stressed syllables.

Note

*Each single unit of stressed and unstressed syllables in a verse is called a **foot**.

III What is Foot?

A foot is a combination of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. It has different combinations, but some are more famous than others. There are four main types of feet in poetry.

1. Iamb (OI)

Iambic foot is formed by two syllables, the first is unstressed (O) while the second is stressed (I).

🔊 *Example: I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud by William Wordsworth*

I **w**andered, **l**onely **a**s a **c**loud
 That **f**loats on **h**igh o'er **d**ales and **h**ills
 When, **a**ll at **o**nce, I **s**aw a **c**rowd
 A **h**ost of **g**olden **d**affodils.

2. Trochee (IO)

This type of foot is formed by two syllables, the first is stressed (I) and the second is unstressed (O).

🔊 *Example: The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe*

And the **R**aven, **n**ever **f**litting, **s**till is **s**itting, **s**till is **s**itting
 On the **p**alid **b**ust of **P**allas **j**ust **a**bove my **c**hamber door;

3. Dactyl (IOO):

A foot with three syllables, one stressed (I) followed by two unstressed syllables (OO).

🔊 *Example: The Charge of the Light Brigade by Tennyson*

"**F**orward, the **L**ight Brigade!
Charge for the **g**uns!" he said.
Into the **v**alley of Death
Rode the six **h**undred.

4. Anapaest (OOI)

A foot with three syllables, the first two are unstressed (OO) while the third syllable is stressed (I).

🔊 *Example: The Destruction of Sennacherib by Lord Byron*

Like the **l**eaves of the **f**orest when **S**ummer is **g**reen,
That host **w**ith their **b**anners at sun**s**et were seen

IV Extra Information

Note

The process of examining rhythm, metre, and foot in a poem is called **scansion**.

Note

Each line of a poem consists of a certain number of feet, thus the system used in the poem is named by combining the type of foot used in the poem and the number of feet in a verse. The number of feet is named using Greek numbers:

1 foot => Monometer	5 feet => Pentameter
2 feet => Dimeter	6 feet => Hexameter
3 feet => Trimeter	7 feet => Heptameter
4 feet => Tetrameter	8 feet => Octameter

Example: *Macbeth* by Shakespeare

Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn, and caldron bubble.

the system used in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is Trochaic-tertametre (type of foot used + number of feet in a verse). In Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is dactylic dimeter