

The place of Cora ritual chants in a typology of poetic metrics

Poetic metrics is the study of how different languages use their specific phonological repertoires to create recurring sound patterns in culturally marked registers and genres of verbal art. Different philological traditions have paid special attention to such phenomena for millennia, but linguistics has not yet sufficiently applied its analytic tools to this area of crucial convergence between linguistic structure and verbal art. Moreover, certain languages from certain parts of the world have received more attention in this regard, which is particularly true of written traditions to the detriment of oral ones. The vast array of strategies by which languages can create poetic meters and the range of possible variation in those strategies has been subjected to scarce scrutiny, which makes a typological approach to this topic very relevant. Such an approach will provide us with insights about how language structure is leveraged for artistic purposes across cultures and languages.

Only two studies to date have undertaken a linguistically informed typology of poetic metrics: Fabb (1997) and Aroui (2009). While their works are excellent starting points, they do not draw on a balanced sample of languages from around the world. Indeed, the indigenous languages of the Americas are particularly neglected, and Edmonson (1971), Tedlock (1983) and Rumsey (2001) go so far as to propose that they lack metrical verbal art altogether.

In this presentation, I will build on Fabb's and Aroui's typologies of poetic metrics, adding more languages from more families, which will allow me to make some refinements to their approaches.

Based on this revised provisional typology of poetic metrics, I will present data from the language that I work on –Cora, a Uto-Aztecan language of Western Mexico. These data consist of a set of recordings of ritual chants which were collected in 1906 by German ethnologist Konrad Theodor Preuss and later metrically analyzed by ethnomusicologist Erich von Hornbostel (Hornbostel 1912).

With the modest technical resources that were at his disposal at the time, Hornbostel proposed that the Cora chants that he analyzed had a metrical system based on syllable length. He provided metrical schemata for the verses, which according to him were composed of a set number of iambs.

My contribution to the matter will be to demonstrate, through a PRAAT analysis, that the Cora chants with which Hornbostel worked do in fact have a metrical system based on syllable length and moreover have iambs as their basic feet. This in itself is a corroboration that constitutes a positive addition to Hornbostel's approach to the problem, since it provides acoustic evidence for his assertions. A further contribution will consist in showing acoustically that the Cora metrical system not only employs brief and long syllables, but also overlong and double overlong ones, which allow for very complex sets of possible substitutions inside the verses.

This treatment of Cora poetic metrics will allow us to situate this culture's verbal art strategy alongside other, better-known examples of poetic metrics (such as those from Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Latin, Classical Arabic or Tamil), thus shedding light on specific features of the language in question (especially, vowel length and its relation to meter) and making an addition to the broader typology of poetic metrical strategies.

This will be the first time that Cora metrics have been studied since 1912, this time with the help of acoustic evidence, which will in turn constitute a contribution to

the incipient and important area of poetic metrical typology. Crucially, this study will also show that indigenous verbal arts from the Americas can in fact have (very intricate) metrical systems and that such systems can occur in a completely oral context of transmission, composition and performance.

References

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