Metrical Evidence for an Interlude Theory of Weight

Donca Steriade, MIT

This study provides an analysis of resyllabification across word boundary in the meters of Greek and Latin. It uses this evidence to argue that the weight categories employed in quantitative meters are based in part on the duration of the entire consonantal interlude (CI) and are thus, in part, independent of syllable assignment. The CI is the sequence separating two nuclei from each other. Based on observations about weight variability in the classical meters and on speculative comparisons with phonetic studies of contemporary languages, I divide the initial clusters of Greek and Latin into two sets, compressible and incompressible: stop-liquid clusters, and, in Greek, voiceless stop-nasal clusters are compressible, most others are incompressible. Compressibility refers to the extent of possible interconsonantal overlap (Mattingly, 1981, Wright 1996, Browman and Goldstein 2001): incompressible clusters are then hypothesized to yield systematically longer CI's; while the CI defined by compressible clusters would vary as a function of the actual overlap between cluster members.

The main finding I discuss is this: a short-nucleus syllable cannot be light, in classical Greek and Latin meters, if followed by a long CI, *no matter where syllable boundaries fall*. Here are the details leading to this conclusion. The distribution of sequences of the form V_1#CCV_2 (where $V_1$is short) is restricted: they occur in Greek verse, scanned as σ̄σ (heavy-X), if V_1 is in strong metrical position, no matter what the cluster is (Schade 1908; this study). They were probably resyllabified in that context ('V_1#.CCV_2 →'V_1#C.CV_2), perhaps as English consonants resyllabify into stressed syllables (Kahn 1976). The V_1#CCV_2 sequences also occur scanned σ̆σ (light-X), when V_1 is in metrically weak position and the cluster is compressible, for poets who scan word medial instances of the same cluster as light. The difference between these two cases suggests that a metrically strong vowel attracts a following C into its syllable; otherwise, word and syllable boundaries must coincide. What happens then to V_1#CCV_2 strings whose V_1 occupied a metrically weak position and whose clusters were incompressible? Such strings should occur unproblematically with the metrical value of σ̆σ, if resyllabification fails and weight is determined exclusively by syllabic assignment; alternatively, they should occur with the metrical value of σ̄σ if leftward resyllabification did occur. But in fact neither option is attested: both Greek and Latin poets systematically avoided such sequences in weak position, if the initial cluster is incompressible. The avoidance is motivated, I claim, by the fact that the first syllable in such strings could not be assigned any metrical value at all: its CI was too long for a light syllable; and, with resyllabification blocked, the first syllable was still too short to count as heavy.

This and other findings motivate an Interlude Theory of Weight (ITW) in which two conditions must hold for a syllable to be heavy or light: one involves standard syllable assignment while the other regulates syllable-independent CI duration. The mechanism of weight computation proposed in the ITW is partly summarized below:

1. A short nucleus projects a heavy syllable iff followed by
   a long CI **and** some tautosyllabic element, vowel or consonant

2. A short nucleus projects a light syllable iff <u>not</u> followed by either
   a long CI **or** any tautosyllabic element, vowel or consonant

The effect of requiring heavy and light syllables to meet both CI duration and syllable assignment conditions makes it possible for this theory to define intermediate cases: syllables that are neither heavy nor light enough to be usable in the meter. These coincide with the sequences avoided.