

Review of *Sprung Rhythm: Corpus study and stochastic grammar*

A very interesting article, publishable as is with only minor corrections, but worth revising in several places to make the key points stronger and to fill in some gaps in the argumentation. Here are some suggestions.

On p. 19 the prose model method is applied to check whether Hopkins' lines are truly metrical or "merely the result of the poet using the language at hand". The result is that about 10% of "lines" of prose cannot be parsed by the metrical constraints into a Sprung Rhythm line consisting of a randomly determined number of feet, whereas less than 1% of actual Sprung Rhythm (2 of 583 lines, or 5 of 583, depending on how you count) cannot be parsed by the constraints into the number of feet that the poem's meter requires. The authors take this as confirming the reality of the metrical constraints, which is fine. But surely the real shocker here is that as much as 90% of prose can somehow be read as Sprung Rhythm. I suspect though that this figure is a misleading consequence of the line-by-line metrical evaluation used by the authors. This procedure obviously imposes a handicap on the metrical system by ignoring some important hard constraints that apply across line boundaries: that a poem is parsed as a continuous grid (except experimentally in one poem, as they note), that the meter remains the same throughout a poem, and that the last strong position of a line (always a stress peak as the authors correctly observe) must rhyme. The article's line-by-line method of assessing metricality has no place for these constraints, although they are inviolable and obviously part of the verse design (not just "diagnostics" of Hopkins's preferred scansion on a par with his diacritics, p. 21). If they were included, couldn't the power of the metrical constraints be indexed more convincingly? For example, a random text probably fails constitute a well-formed Hopkins sonnet with close to 100% probability. (Also, with this fuller constraint set it would not have been necessary to exclude "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo" from the data, for its lineation is revealed by the rhyme scheme).

I'm not sure why the authors decided to leave out the cross-line constraints that they spell out so clearly. Maybe because it is more convenient for the computer to scan one line at a time? That would arguably be a bad reason — who's boss, after all?

This point relates to a question that deserves more attention in the article: what exactly is the problem with indeterminacy of scansion that needs to be overcome? Why is it undesirable that most lines, taken individually, have several legal metrical parses? The only argument given (p. 2) is that the existence of alternative scansion weakens the theory by making it more likely that a line will be metrical simply by accident. But if an entire poem can hardly be metrical simply by accident, as I just suggested, this argument disappears. Are there better arguments? It also seems to me that there might actually be good reasons for multiple scansion options to be resolved by context within each poem. A particular metrical parse can fit better into the overall metrical style or pattern of the poem than another. As a hypothetical example, some Sprung Rhythm poems have an

“iambic” character, others are more “anapestic”, and this might well determine the assignment of weak syllables to outrides as opposed to disyllabic weak positions in those poems. The assumption that each line should ideally be metrically unambiguous can be challenged on esthetic grounds as well: ambiguity resolved at a higher level of structure is the essence of artistic form.

In (41), the assignment of the underlined weak syllable to a doubly-filled W position in (41a) and to an in (41b) does not look arbitrary. In the former case, the syllable is light, by resyllabification with a following V, in the latter it is not. Does this generalize to the other cases?

Can a strong position in Hopkins consist of just a light stressed syllable? Requiring S to be minimally a moraic trochee (as Hanson and Kiparsky do) would make the second and fourth scansion in (44) unmetrical, not just dispreferred. (In (24a) *whether* can be a resolved S.) If this works, doesn’t it cut down a lot on the indeterminacy of scansion?

Hopkins claimed to be following a strict categorical metrical system of his own invention. So what is the status and provenance of the probabilistic constraints and of their weights? Should we conclude that they describe Hopkins’ stylistic preferences and their relative importance for him, possibly unconscious?

If I understand the discussion on p. 32-33, there are several models that give results that are effectively indistinguishable from the maxent one. Of these, the “stratal” approach achieves comparable predictions with the sparsest tools. It leaves the violable constraints mutually unranked, except that the near-inviolable *OUTRIDE-SHORT LINE outranks the others. This makes the weighting of constraints to the third decimal in the maxent approach look like overkill. To what degree of precision should a model match the frequencies in a data base of only 583 lines?

Minor points:

p. 18 (27): *wind-lifted* is a compound — there some variation even in Shakespeare in the placement of trisyllabic compounds like this in SWS and WSW position (words like *grandfather*, for example).

p. 32: correct *accidently* to *accidentally*

p. 32: referring to Anttila-style treatment of variation as Stratal Optimality Theory risks confusion with the phonological theory of that name (Kiparsky et al.).

fn. 16: I believe a common pronunciation of *comrade* (at least in British English) has an unstressed reduced vowel in the second syllable. If so, this is not an exception.

fn. 21: correct *misleading* to *misleadingly*