On the relation of prosody to metrical structure in Old Japanese

The specific set of properties employed in the formal-poetic system(s) of a given language derive in part from the properties of the underlying linguistic subsystems of that language (its phonology, morphology and syntax, lexicon, etc.), in part from historical factors (inheritance, contact), and in part from other, extralinguistic considerations. One pervasive theme of Ilse Lehiste's research was the way in which a language's prosody naturally constrained its poetic meter: "the prosody of a language is crystallized in the prosody of poetry created in that language" (Lehiste 1985), and this theme reflects the broader interest, among metrists, in discovering the formal bases of poetic or metrical systems in underlying linguistic structures and processes.

This paper presents a case study of the relationship between the general prosodic structures and phonological process in a language, and the formal properties of its native metrical system. I propose that in Old Japanese – a syllabically timed language with strictly constrained syllable structure (only CV- and V-type syllables obtained, the latter being limited by various morphophonological processes to occurrence in word-initial position) – a synchronically active process of aphesis and typical prosodic-word size worked together to motivate a metrical system based on lines ('short' lines of five, and 'long' lines of seven syllables, set in heterometrical stanzas) and heretofore undescribed hemistichs, without reference to feet. These metrical constituents were left-headed, and the metrically strong positions on their left edges could license the occurrence of V-type syllables, which were in all other positions reduced through aphesis.

In the extant corpus of Old Japanese (eighth century C.E.) poetry, unequivocally hypo- and hypermetrical lines (i.e., lines comprising only CV-type syllables) are extraordinarily rare, while *orthographically hypermetrical* lines are common: but such lines always contain at least one VV-sequence, leading scholars since the nineteenth century to posit that said sequences were reduced in recitation, resulting in metrical lines. On the other hand, metrically licit line-internal VV-sequences ('hiatuses') are highly constrained in occurrence: hiatuses only appear in long (seven syllable) lines, and then only in certain positions, namely at hemistich boundaries. These hemistich boundaries straddle the syllable positions nearest the middle of poem-internal long lines, that is between the third and fourth or between the fourth and fifth syllables, and always correspond with (minimally) prosodic word boundaries. V-type syllables are not licit at the left edges of prosodic words that are not aligned with the left edges of metrical constituents.

Nonetheless, words beginning with V-type syllables are very common in the Old Japanese lexicon (constituting approximately 20% of words by type frequency – more than any single type of consonantal onset). This fact, coupled with the optionality of hiatus at hemistich boundaries – VV-sequences are permitted, but not required, thus allowing for the insertion of an extra syllable as needed – introduces a singular element of flexibility to the otherwise very strict meter of Old Japanese poetry, and concurs with Hanson & Kiparsky's (1996) claim (the FIT criterion) that "languages select meters in which their entire vocabularies are usable in the greatest variety of ways".

References

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