Syllable-Counting Meter in Soqotri Poetry

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ABSTRACT
Within the advance of generative metrical theory that is concerned with the linguistic study of versification, poetry investigation has been undeniably played a significant role in enhancing such progress. The research of linguistic scholars has been mainly focused on the exploration of English poetry with minor concentration on the examination of poetry in other languages, and that clearly implies the need of such research. Thus, the present study aims to examine the meter in Soqotri poetry under the framework of Optimality Theory (OT). It reveals that Soqotri poetry is regulated by poetic meter that constrains the size of the line with a fixed number of syllables with no systematic rhythm or alliteration. The OT analysis offered in this study derives the restrictions on the size of the line with minimalism and maximality constraints. It shows the capability of OT in generating the well-formedness of non-rhythmic meter that constrains the phonological constituency in Soqotri poetry.

Key words: Soqotri, Syllable, Meter, Optimality Theory

INTRODUCTION
In poetry, the basic feature of structured rhythmic verse or lines in verse texts is ‘meter’. This abstract template is commonly identifiable in verse forms such as poetry and songs from prosodic regularities including rhythm, quantity and phrasing (Hayes 1988). As far as rhythm is concerned, various linguistic studies of poetic meter divided it into two main groups, either rhythmic meters that normally regulate the size and prominence of the poetic text, or non-rhythmic meters that only regulate the size and lack rhythm in the poem (Fabb 2016: 449). In this respect, the present study examines the meter in the collected verse and folklore texts of one of the South Arabian languages, the Soqotri language. It has been observed that the collected Soqotri Oral Literature, poetry in particular, by Naumkin and Kogan (2014) revealed a quantitative meter that constrains the number of syllables per line. Building upon published poems of Soqotri poetry in Naumkin and Kogan (2014), this study aims to offer a simplifying analysis of Soqotri poetry in terms of markedness under an Optimality Theory approach (hereafter OT) originated by Prince and Smolensky (1993). In order to create a framework for the study, the following questions have been taken into consideration:
1- What is the relationship between non-rhythmic meter and the phonology of ordinary language?
2- How can non-rhythmic meter in Soqotri poetry be generated using OT?

THE METER OF SOQOTRI POETRY
The Soqotri language is one of the surviving South Semitic languages spoken merely on the islands of Socotra, Abd al Kuri and Samhah. It has been recently classified with Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, South Semitic and South Arabian languages with roughly 71,400 speakers (Simeone 2003). Most Soqotri poetic texts have been collected by Naumkin and Kogan in their Corpus of Soqotri Oral Literature in two volumes (2014). This significant corpus comprises 60 published texts (folklore and ethnographic texts) along with the Arabic and English translations that were hugely inspired by D.H. Müller’s pioneering studies of the 1900s. In the corpus, Naumkin and Kogan (2014) indicate that the Soqotri poem is organised into an ‘eight-beat metrical pattern’ which Kogan and Bulakh (2017) signify as ‘isometric eight-syllable lines’. Indeed, this can imply that Soqotri poetry has a syllable-counting meter which counts for eight constituents (syllables) per line. The following is Text 21 in the Corpus, called ‘A Wondrous Palm’, a poetic ode to a palm tree whose owner waters it with milk and cream so that it matures in just
one night, bringing forth delicious fruits that very next morning. One of its clusters can feed nine men, and even a sick man regains his appetite upon seeing the marvellous dates. This poem was partly known to D. H. Müller (1905: 352) and clearly shows the basic eight-syllable meter (Naumkin and Kogan 2014: 306):

**TÔMRE MEŞaNKÉRO**

1) Watered Wa-taš Šiḥo
2) Di-mañák šažáreño
3) Di-hinîyo bo/di-kašáyyhon
4) Di-šöuṣa bo-šañaf di-ʻerhon
5) Damadáman bo-ʻerbeño
6) Wa-núbot ṭa-fašá șm
7) Wa-laʃ taneýyr koşa
8) Wa-gédh thu sèe ʻayyúg
9) Wa-kalaʼak ha-yhaṇ țad šemrah
10) Wa-mañá ţeg wa-dëg zënog
11) Wa-man-ţa di-góor ţentaf

A WONDROUS PALM

I have one palm tree here,
A wondrous green one,
Planted in di-Kasayhon,
with goat’s milk,
With milk-føam settling at its roots.
It is pollinated when the sun rises
And when the sun sets, one picks the fruit.
Nine men came to visit me—I tossed them a cluster.
One ate a bit, another took a bit with him,
And even a sick one found his appetite.

In this poem, there are some lines with more or less than eight syllables as in lines 2 and 3, which have seven and nine syllables respectively. However, the occurrence of such variation might be considered as normal variation similar to English poets when they play fast and loose with iambic pentameter. The lack of any systematic rhythm or alliteration is another issue regarding Soqotri poetry.

**σ σ σ σ σ σ σ Total**

| Wa- tay / Šiḥo / bo / la- / ŏa / bim / re | [8] |
| Di- / ma / Šā / ŋa / ņa / ŋo | [7] |
| Di- / hi / ni / yo / bo- / di- / ŋa / Šiḥaf / yhon | [9] |
| Di- / ṭoṣ / Ša / bo- / Šañaf / di- / ņeř / ŏon | [8] |
| Da / må / ŏa / mo / ņa / ba- / ņeř / ño / tó | [8] |
| Wa- / nú / bot / laʃ / tó / ŋa / ŋa / ŋo | [8] |

This study will argue that the meter of Soqotri poetry constrains size over the prosodic constituents, more precisely the syllable. Its size constraints require the metrical constituent that is the line should have exactly eight syllables. The line, thus, is the domain of the size constraints.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Metrical text in language versification such as a poem is “a text whose phonological form is governed by a set of metrical rules” (Fabb 2016: 449). These metrical rules, poetic meter in particular, involve the following phonological form: phonological constituency (size, such as syllable or mora) and strength (prominence, for instance stress which relates to rhythmic meters) (Fabb 2016: 449). The non-rhythmic genres demand the poetic text to conform to an abstract prosodic template. The meter in non-rhythmic genres either constrains the size and prominence or the size only without the prominence (or vice versa). This study will assume that Soqotri poetry is regulated by non-rhythmic meter that regulates the phonological constituency (the size) over the level of line. Indeed, this assumption relies heavily on a number of scholarly generalisations over Naumkin and Kogan’s genre (2014), including Naumkin and Kogan (2014) as well as Kogan and Bulakh (2017).

Numerous theoretical approaches have notably considered the structure of verse in many disciplines. Among these approaches is Generative Metrics, which originated in the works of Halle and Keyser (1966, 1971) and Magnuson and Ryder (1970, 1971) that fundamentally consider the idea of the grounding of meter in language. This approach to the theory and typology of versification takes linguistics, both as a methodological model and as a source of explanatory principles (Kiparsky 2020: 659). Generative metrics hold the idea that poetry is grounded in the same principles as non-poetic language, where the same tool can be used to analyse the poetic meter and the prosody of language. In fact, this is what Fabb (2010) referred to as the ‘Development Hypothesis’ and recently Blumenfeld (2015) called it ‘The Grounding Hypothesis’. This hypothesis arises from the general generative principles of minimalism in which the smallest number of constraints are highly preferred. Based on this hypothesis, the poetic meter should not be analysed based on the metrical hierarchy in verse (Beat < Foot < Dipod < Half Line < Line < Couplet < Quatrain < Poem), nevertheless on the prosodic hierarchy in a language (Mora < Syllable < Foot < Word < Intonational Group < Utterance). Despite the fact that this hypothesis avoids any reference to the line (Fabb and Halle 2008: 4), still some work does agree to treat the line as a metrical primitive (Golston and Riad 2005). Building on this approach, this study will evaluate the meter of Soqotri poetry by offering a markedness analysis in parallel Optimality Theory (OT) (Prince and Smolensky 1993).

THE METER OF SOQOTRI POETRY IN OPTIMALITY THEORY

This section proposes a proper analysis of the meter of Soqotri poetry using the widely used theoretical approach in discussing any phonological and metrical issues, Optimality Theory (OT) (Prince and Smolensky 1993), to derive metricality via markedness constraints, which then jointly with the faithfulness constraints, enforces faithfulness to the lexical form of the text, not to the meter, to derive meter. The OT accounts of metrical phenomena is capable of framing the rules that a metrical composition obeys as a set of ranked constraints, and the patterns noticeable in metrical compositions resulting from relative constraints interaction. Recalling the meter in Soqotri poetry, it constrains only the size of the line, and not the size of any prosodic constituent below the line, hence this meter does not have any constituents resembling poetic feet, the analysis of this meter must treat the line as a metrical primitive. The size meter in Soqotri poetry can be typologised using three constraints: the first sets the poetic molecule (which prosodic constituent is constrained for size), the second, the poetic atom (which constituent is counted), and the last, the number of molecules per minimal
poetic constituent (for instance, line) (Skilton 2016: 5). This study will argue that the meter in Soqotri poetry is a pure size meter that constrains the size of the line with a fixed number of syllables. Building on Skilton’s (2016: 33) proposal that basically implies general size constraints given below which can accurately account for rhythmic and non-rhythmic poetic meter; in this proposal, Skilton (2016: 34) indicates that the size molecule parameter determines which constituent of the poetic prosodic hierarchy is constrained for size; the size atom parameter, and which constituent is used to measure the size molecule:

MinMolecule: Assign one violation for every SIZE ATOM by which the SIZE MOLECULE falls short of n SIZE ATOMS.

MaxMolecule: Assign one violation for every SIZE ATOM by which the SIZE MOLECULE exceeds n SIZE ATOMS.

In order to create a text with single metrical norm and no allowable variance from it, only one pair of MaxMolecule and MinMolecule constraints is active where the constraints count every atom in the given text. Nevertheless, only the systematic form of variance can be also modelled using this parameter. Indeed, the MaxMolecule and MinMolecule constraints are commonly used to enforce minimality as well as maximality requirements in ordinary phonology of a language (Broselow 1982, DeLacy 2008). The two constraints will be used to formalise size requirements in Soqotri poetry meter that regulates the size of the line and sets the same target for every line of the poems by the following markedness constraints MinLine and MaxLine illustrated as follows:

MinLine: Assign one violation for every syllable by which the line falls short of eight syllables.

MaxLine: Assign one violation for every syllable by which the line exceeds eight syllables.

Along with the above markedness size constraints, the following faithfulness constraint, Faith, is essential to ensure the avoidance of any deletion or epenthesis (McCarthy and Prince 1993).

FAITH: The output is identical to the input. Assign one violation per segment or tone different in the output and the input.

Concerning the ranking of the markedness as well as the faithfulness constraint, the Faith constraint must be ranked above all the size constraints in order to avoid deletion or epenthesis, the two size constraints MinLine and MaxLine are unviolated. The next tableau, presents the evaluation of the line in Soqotri poem showing the interaction between the markedness constraints and the faithfulness constraint.

| Wa-ṭəy šhō ḷə-ḥa tə́mre | FAITH | MinLine | MaxLine |
|------------------------|------|--------|--------|
| σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ |     |     |       |
| a) Wa- / τ yy / šiˁ/ ho / ḷə- / ḷa / tə́mre | * |     |       |
| b) Wa- / τ yy / šiˁ/ ho / ḷə- / ḷa / tə́mre / re / re | * |     |       |
| c) Wa- / τ yy / šiˁ/ ho / ḷə- / ḷa / tə́mre / re |     |     |       |

In this evaluation, three possible candidates have been proposed to include different patterns of epenthesis or deletion. Candidate (a) is not the optimal since it fatally violates the faithfulness constraint FAITH with the deletion of the final syllable. It also violates the size constraint MinLine as the line is shorter than eight syllables. Candidate (b) permits an additional final syllable, causing fatal violation to the Faith along violation of the MaxLine constraint due to exceeding the size limit of a line (nine syllables instead of eight). Lastly, candidate (c) as the optimal candidate, since it faithfully satisfies all the size constraints as well as the faithfulness constraint. Indeed, the crucial ranking of markedness and faithfulness constraints that are capable for generating the meter in Soqotri poetry is given below: FAITH >> MinLine, MaxLine. In summary, this markedness-based analysis supports the assumption, which is essential to generative metrics, that general phonology and poetic meter arise from the same source.

CONCLUSION

This research explores the Soqotri poetry and reveals that it is regulated by non-rhythmic size meter that constrains the lines in the poem to a fixed number of syllables. In this research, a sufficient optimality-theoretic analysis has been proposed in order to generate well-formedness of Soqotri poem lines. This theoretical approach manages to give an adequate clarification regarding the meter of Soqotri poetry that can clearly regulate the size at the level of the line. The markedness-based analysis is capable of suggesting parametric definitions of constraints generating the meter of Soqotri poetry that can clearly regulate the size at the level of the line, fulfilling the aim of the study. Furthermore, it is consistent with the development hypothesis, as it uses representations and constraints that are already used in the phonology of ordinary language, and captures similarities between poetic meter and the prosody of non-poetic language. In summary, specific size constraints invoked in the analysis and substantial ranking arguments have been considered in order to enforce the minimality and maximality requirements in the poetic meter. Such an analysis can be perhaps extended to provide a better clarification for other non-rhythmic meters that constrains the size at the level of lines such as Sulawesi poetry.

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