The rhythm in Catalan hexasyllables: personal style and grammar limitations

Jesús Jiménez, Universitat de València
jesus.jimenez@uv.es

A poet's choice of rhythmic patterns is affected by three factors: a universal set of metrical constraints, common to all languages; the metrical grammar and lexical structure of the poet's language; and the poet's style. To analyze how these three factors influence the frequency of different stress patterns in Catalan poetry, this paper focuses on the rhythmic structure of the hexasyllable verse in a corpus of Catalan ancient poetry (built on A. March's poems) and Catalan contemporary poetry (built on V. A. Estellés' poems). The former, containing 2,464 hexasyllables, is extracted from the second part of A. March decasyllables, which are structured as a line with a stress on the 4th and the 10th syllables; hence, as a sequence of 4 plus 6 syllables. The latter, containing 2,522 hexasyllables, is extracted from the two hemistichs of V. A. Estellés alexandrines in *Llibre de meravelles*, which are structured as 6 plus 6 syllables, with a stress on the last syllable of each hemistich. Our first goal is to show that the attested patterns are indeed grounded on general rhythmic constraints thoroughly attested in the literature, and that in both corpora the patterns that better satisfy these requirements are preferred and thus are more frequent (on this issue, see, e. g., Golston 1998). A second goal is to demonstrate that, beyond minor surface variations in the distribution of stress patterns due to the authors' particular style, there are similarities attributable to the structure of the language and the universal grammar.

Hexasyllables in general, as well as those forming part of a decasyllable or an alexandrine verse, consist of six metrical syllables: the sixth syllable must be stressed and unstressed posttonic syllables after the sixth are considered to be extrametrical, as in the alexandrine "féta - de - llúms - mo-dés-<tos> / i - de - mo-dés-tes - mú-<si-ques>". There are no special requirements regarding the accentual pattern of the syllables preceding the stressed sixth syllable: any combination of stressed and unstressed syllables would be in principle possible (32 combinations in all).

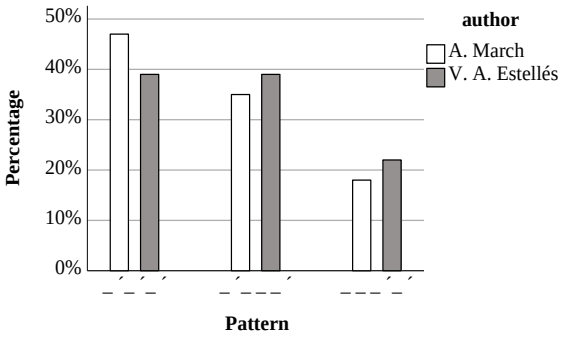
Results show, though, that there is a much more limited number of patterns, whose frequency mostly relates to the extent to which they satisfy the requirements of a set of metrical constraints; especially, *CLASH: 'No sequences of stressed syllables (´ ´)', and *LAPSE: 'No sequences of stressless syllables (– – –)'. Patterns without clashes and lapses and with a purely binary (– ´ – ´ – ´) or ternary (– – ´ – – ´) rhythm are the most frequent in both authors. While generally coinciding in the rank order of the different schemes, though, March displays a preference for having a binary structure at the level of the foot, with a sequence of three iambs: (– ´ – ´ – ´), whereas Estellés shows a preference for having a binary structure at the level of the hemistich, with two anapestic feet containing three syllables: (– – ´ – – ´). This is the only remarkable difference between both authors, and relates to a predominantly narrative style in Estellés. The selection of a looser metrical pattern enables him to use a larger portion of the vocabulary of the language, as promoted by the FIT principle ('Languages select meters in which their entire vocabularies are usable in the greatest variety of ways', Hanson & Kiparsky 1996: 294)

Patterns with unavoidable stress clashes, instead, are very rare in both corpora, especially at the edges of the line, because they give rise to the most ametrical structures. Sequences of more than two unstressed syllables (i.e., lapses) are instead more usual, because,

since Catalan shows a vast array of polysyllable words, these patterns allow a larger portion of the vocabulary to fit in the line (following again the constraint FIT).

Finally, among patterns with the same number of clashes and lapses, those satisfying general eurhythmic constraints are preferred. For instance, besides the purely binary pattern (– ´ – ´ – ´), there are two binary-like patterns more: (– ´ – – – ´) and (– – – ´ – ´). These two models are considered binary because they can be repaired by adding a rhythmic stress in the middle of the sequence of three stressless syllables: (– – –) → (– ´ –). In terms of complexity, these two structures seem equivalent, since both contain a sequence of three unstressed syllables. However, the first one, with a longer unstressed span at the end, is favored by the LONGLAST principle ('In a sequence of groups of unequal length, the longest member should go last', Hayes/MacEachern 1998, 489) and is by far more common.

As said, the whole distribution of the patterns varies in an author-specific way, displaying a tendency to balance the two basic patterns, binary-like and ternary-like, in V. A. Estellés (1,137 vs 947) and a preference for binary-like patterns in A. March (1,507 vs 735). Within these two basic patterns, the frequency of the subpatterns is similar in the two examined corpora, as shown in the table with the three most common binary-like sequences (1,507 sequences in March and 1,137 in Estellés). Note, on the other hand, that the frequency ordering of the subpatterns in the Table is roughly the same for both authors, as defined by the universal constraints assessing their well-formedness (*LAPSE, violated by the last two patterns, and LONGLAST, violated just by the least common one). In our view, this double agreement stems from the fact that the two authors use the same language and must grapple with a lexicon that is more or less identical. As a result, similar percentages emerge out of the delicate balance struck between the expression of ideas and the search for the ideal binary or pure ternary rhythm. All told, therefore, the two poets reach similar solutions with equivalent frequencies, because their poetry exhibits the same metrical grammar.



In conclusion, since the formal suitability of the patterns is governed by universal constraints on metrical well-formedness that are shared by both authors, the rank order of the schemes by frequency practically always coincides in the two examined corpora. While there are many concurrences, we have also found that the proportion of binary and ternary patterns is determined by the authors' style, with March exhibiting a slight inclination toward the iambic rhythm. That said, especially in the family of binary patterns, we find quite a similar distribution among the various schemes, even to the point that they are often statistically equivalent.

References

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