



# Metrical Patterns and Melodicity in English Contrasted with French

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## Abstract

It is often considered that English is Trochaic at the foot level (and this may explain the tendency to leftward-ho! stress shift at the word level), but that at the higher levels a syntactically based Iambic broad-focus pattern dominates.

The presence of Trochaic patterns at the higher level has then either to be explained by information structured stress shifts (de-accentuation of back-ground information, contrastive stress, etc.) or by the application of automatic meaning-neutral rhythm based shifts which avoid the stress clashes that would result from the application of the Iambic patterns (automatic pistol /3020 10/ → /2030 10/).

I will suggest that there is in fact variability between this higher level syntactic based Iambic patterning and one in which the rhythmically based structure (typical of eurhythmic realisations) is trochaic all the way up to the highest level, which alone is Iambic; and this would be very close to the Traditional British “initial-strong Head + final-strong Tonic” structure.

Contrasting English with French, I also argue that it is necessary to distinguish two types of strongly melodic realisation. The first concerns the organisation of tones within a single Tone Group (intra-contour patterning) typical of the “chant” or “the melodic cliché” Fonagy [1]. The second concerns the rhythmic organisation of contours between themselves possibly across T.G.s (inter-contour patterning) for which the term “Sing-songy”, or “Swinging” realisation, would seem more appropriate.

## 1. Chants and “Swinging” Realisations

Although both melodic patterns occur in English, which tends to stress-based timing, the “flatter” rhythmic patterning of syllable-based timing in French is not inductive to “swinging” realisations, and French speakers frequently use the chant where English speakers would use this realisation.

Bernard Tranel [7] gives the striking example of children’s ‘counting chants’ in English and French to illustrate the fact that English tends to be a stressed timed language: only the stressed syllables count for the rhythm, literally, when children count each other **out** or **in**; while as French is predominantly a syllable timed language every syllable counts for the rhythm (except that is, if the unstressed syllable contains a so called mute <e>).

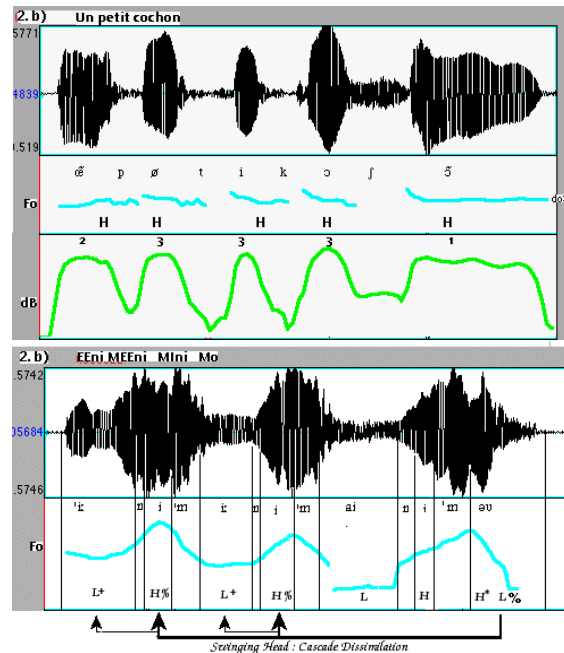
I have used the term counting chant for French ‘comptine’; and the French comptine below (1a) is indeed usually chanted as in (2a), in the sense defined in Hind (5) and Fonagy (1). The characteristic of this type of realisation, which would account for its melodicity, is the relative sustained level or stability of the intonation contour within the syllable (“régularité micro-mélodique”); and this chanted realisation (2a) shows remarkable stability even across

syllables, remaining within a quarter tone, or so, of Do3 (C3).

Although Tranel was quite right to use this French counting chant “intuitively” to help students of French understand that every syllable counts equally, quite literally, in French: in a spoken realisation of the French ‘comptine’, the unstressed syllables are indeed of almost equal strength and duration., the final strongest syllable having only slightly greater duration than the preceding weak syllables. In point of fact, it is at least partly to escape from this syllable-equal timing constraint that the chant mode is employed here: in the chant, the final strong syllable of the group can undergo considerable lengthening, marking it off rhythmically from the preceding weak syllables far more clearly than in the non-chanted French realisation.

1) Children’s counting chants:

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| a) French spoken               | b) English                                 |
| Iambs wk (wk) STR <sup>1</sup> | Trochaic STR wk                            |
| un peTIT / coCHON              | /EEni /MEEni /MIni /MO É                   |
| pendu AU / plaFOND             | /CATCH a /Tiger /BY the /TOEÉ <sup>2</sup> |



Now, in the trochaic rhythmic timing of the English ‘comptine’, each strong pivotal syllable ‘borrows time’ from the following trailing weak syllable. The final monosyllable, however, tends to be “stretched” to be worth the time-value of a complete strong-weak trochee. The final and strongest

<sup>1</sup> Anapaests are complex iambs as Dactyls are complex trochees (see 17).

<sup>2</sup> apologies for the implied cruelty to tigers

syllable of the line is thus marked off by increased length, as in the French chant, but in this case it is due to the “normal” constraints on stress timing (see (2b) above).

The strong melodicity is here directly related to the rhythmic organisation of the « swinging head » in which each low-level trochaic foot is repeatedly aligned with an identical L+ H »% contour obtained by cascade dissimilation from the final « L % » juncture tone of the H\* L + L% » contour. The « Sing-songy » effect is due to contour repetition rather than tonal stability.

This swinging foot-aligned head pattern in British English occurs in spontaneous discourse contexts in what Halliday [3] calls intense realisations, as in (3):

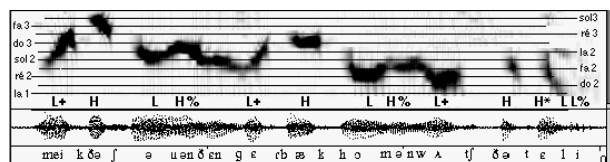
- 3) (He) / SAID he'd / VOTE for a Re/PUBLICan.  
 / L+ H% / L+ H% / H\* L L%  
 (Exasperated: he did not do what he said he would do)

Increased melodicity can be achieved by combining the sing-songy head while echoing the L H% pattern even on the Tonic:

- 4) (He) / SAID he'd / VOTE for a Re/PUBLICan.  
 / L+ H% / L+ H% / L\* H L L%  
 (Sing-songy mocking realisation: I am scathing about the fact that this was his intention (French, “Na-Na Nere”).)

I recently heard this complex sing-songy mocking realisation on BBC Prime, as an interviewee riled his interviewer, Louis Theroux.

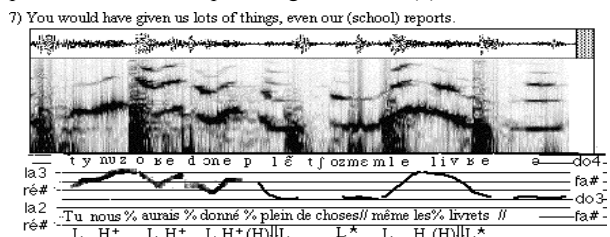
- 5) / MAKE the / SHOW % (and then) / GET back / HOME % (and) / WATCH the / TELly //  
 2 0 3 2 0 3 2 0 1 0  
 L+ H L+ H% L+ H L H% L+ H H\* L L%



The Swinging-Head contour can even be force-aligned on a text which would not normally pattern trochaically:

- 6) / PAME / la is / WRONG/  
 L + H % / L+ H % / HL //  
 (How many times must I tell you).

By contrast, the only example of a similar Swinging-head type that I have discovered in French has the ‘inverse’ iambic patterning [5]. This occurred in children’s let’s pretend games, where the children caricatured the French story-telling intonation (itself relatively sing-songy), in order to set the premise in their let’s pretend games, as in (7).below.



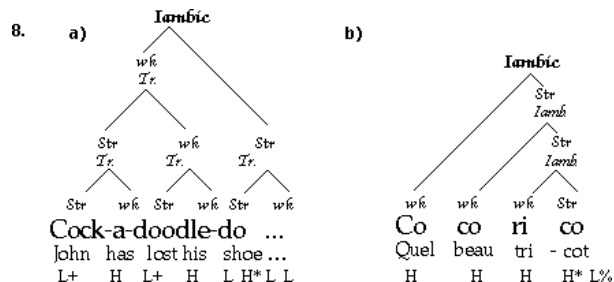
## 2. Super-trochees and stereotyped structures

In spite of this rare example of a French swinging-head pattern, in the case of the onomatopoeic crow of the cockerel,

where English speakers generally use the swinging head, French speakers once more resort to the chant. This seems to be the only way that the French speaker can escape from the constraints of equal syllable timing to produce the imitative sustained fall on the last syllable of the cockerel’s chant.

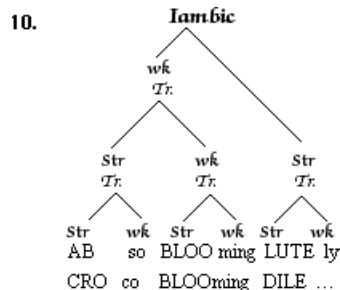
The French open syllabic organisation [kokoriko] (kV\$ kV\$ r/IV\$ kV\$/) is common to most other Indo-European languages.

The English trochaic patterning, on the other hand is quite distinct from other languages for which I can find a description. The impression of a sustained final fall, again results from the forced alignment of the final strong monosyllable with a complete trochaic foot. While the non final feet are regrouped into a super-trochee; and each trochee of this super-trochaic head is generally aligned with a repeated “L+ H%” contour, obtained by cascade dissimilation from the final “L %” juncture tone of the independent H\* L + L% contour”. This shows to what extent even an onomatopoeia undergoes the rhythmic constraints of the language.



This same super-trochaic pattern turns up again in the organisation of the London intensifier infixes. A well-known example of this comes from “My fair lady”, the musical film version of Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, in which Eliza Doolittle uses the expression “abso-blooming-lutely”. The infix intensifier must split the Head it modifies into plausible trochees, and the infix expletive itself must be strictly trochaic. The forms in (9a, b, and c) are not possible; (10) is the only possible structure:

9. a) \*Ab-blooming-solutely/, b) \*Absolute-blooming-ly/,  
 c) \*Abso-damn-lutely,

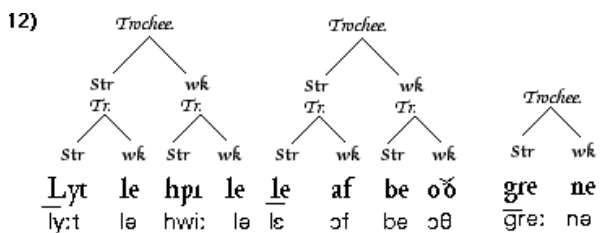
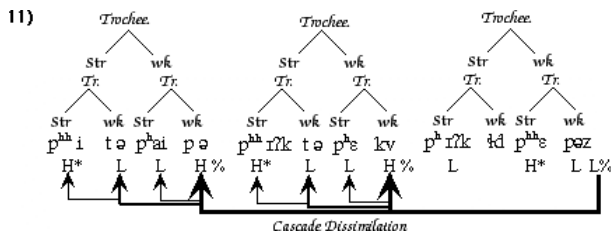


This is also the characteristic pattern of alliterative tongue-twisters. In “Peter Piper” (11), a binary super-trochaic pattern is forced on to all the non final binary feet; while the final pair of feet receives the inverse iambic pattern. It is this change in rhythm which marks off the final pair of feet (“peppers”). It follows on from this that the super-trochaic patterning (along with its dependant contour), marks the text to which it is associated as non-final.

The Melodicity is again the result of a swinging-head derived by a complex cascade dissimilation from the final

floating Low tone.

As with all stereotyped patterns the tongue-twister's super-trochaic patterning could well preserve older fossilised, patterns in the language, perhaps conserving a trace of O. E. alliterative rhythmic patterning, as shown in (12).



Indeed, examples such as the following could indicate similar Iambic to Trochaic shifts in OE alliterative poetry within a non-final NP (sæ wealle /2 1 0/ → /1 2 0/).<sup>3</sup>

13) Ic wæs be s̄onde, s̄æwealle neah

Note that in Present British English Sea-wall. /21/ is Phrasal Iambic: "sea" does not subcategorise but just localises the head("wall"); it acts as an adjunct rather than a complement to the head, contrasting with "sea-bird" /10/, a category of bird.

### 3. Variability in Intonation "Head" structures

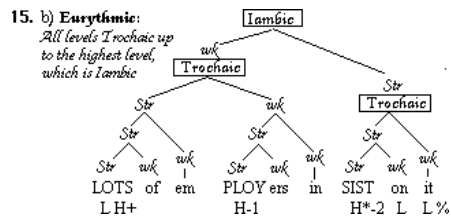
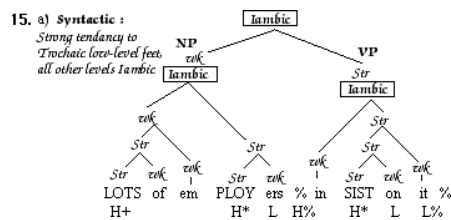
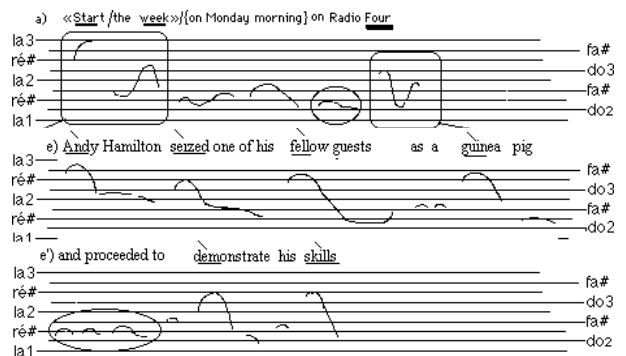
However, far from being simply a fossil remain, I have discovered that this Iambic to Trochaic shift on Phrasal Nouns can even occur in Present English 'natural' speech when the speaker wants to heighten the tension and draw the listener closer in to key them up for what follows. An example from Margaret Howard's radio style in Pick of the Week on BBC 4 is shown in (14b). The phrasal stress pattern is inverted on "Andy Hamilton", and each following trochaic pattern leads the listener on to the final "demonstrate his skills." On the other hand, the title "Start the week"(14a) as a citation, receives an Iambic phrasal pattern marking it off "syntactically" from what follows.

Numerous examples of this sort (as in. the "Peter-Piper" pattern of telephone numbers: "[[EIGHT-one]Str [SIX-three]wk] [[FOUR-one]wk [TWO]Str]"), stress [2 0 / 3 0 % / 3 0 / 1 É%) should lead us to suspect that there is more variability in the higher level rhythmic structure than generally considered.

In (15 a), a syntactically based iambic phrasal pattern has been associated to the sentence above the trochaic foot level; while in (15 b) - based on, but significantly different from, Giegerich ([2]) - a eurhythmic trochaic grouping applies at all levels across syntactic boundaries except at the highest level, creating a British-school type initial-strong Head.

<sup>3</sup> It could equally well be that in OE the pattern within the NP was more generally trochaic than in Present English

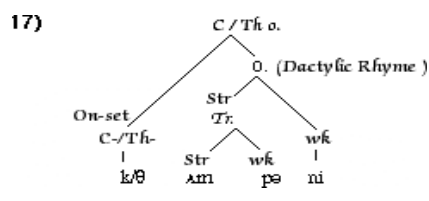
14) Extract from "Pick of the Week" BBC 4.



Foot determined enclisis across syntactic boundaries testify to the linking role of the low-level trochee. Examples of this abound in the literature: "cuppa" derived from [[cup][of /tea], being a case in point [4]. Examples of Cockney rhyming slang appear to follow the same pattern when the expression "Tit-for-tat" (rhyming with "Hat") can be reduced to "Titfer"; or "Mutt-and-Jeff" (a comedy double-act, rhyming with "Deaf"), can be reduced to "Mutton".

Perhaps the first "linguist" to have captured this process is Mark Twain in a limerick (16) which relies, for its comic effect, on an unusual extension of the abbreviation <Co.> (= [k-ampən]), to visually code the attack consonant <C-> (= [k]), plus the Dactylic (foot-level) rhyme as <o.> (= [ampəni]).<sup>4</sup> This abbreviation, <Tho.>, treats the unaccentuated two syllable word <any>, literally, as a suffix to the preceding stressed word <thump>, as shown in (17).

- 16.) 1.1. A man hired by John Smith and Co.,  
1.2. Loudly declared he'd Tho.  
1.3. Men that he saw  
1.4. Dumping dirt near his store,  
1.5. The drivers, therefore, didn't Do.



<sup>4</sup> Another anonymous limerick codes a similar enclisis with "Mr.", as in its final line: "This Mr. Kr. Sr." (Kr. also codes elision of /h/ in this process, and /d/ devoicing, [kɪstə])

I am simply extending this notion of trochaic linking to the higher rhythmic level; so that in {{John} {kissed Mary}}, *John* and *kissed* will be rhythmically grouped together (as [[John kissed] [Mary]]) so as to form a trochaic-Head across syntactic boundaries (as in the British Intonation Head tradition), unless the speaker introduces a rhythmic break after *John*. ([[John...] [kissed Mary]]), in which case *John* and *kissed Mary* would probably correspond to an independent T.G..

#### 4. Right-ward shift as a significant distortion

A further effect of the trochaic foot patterning is the strong tendency to “leftward ho!” stress shifts in words borrowed from Latinate languages, which initially may present a pseudo iambic pattern (18), but then tend to shift so that the word boundaries are better aligned with the foot boundaries (19):

- 18) (wk) / Str wk  
 gə / rɑ:ʒ  
 19) <garage> a) gə / rɑ:ʒ b) /gæ / rɑ:dʒ c) /gærɪdʒ  
 0 1 1 3 1 0

Forms like (18), which in fact are a trochaic based rendering of the French iambic pattern, are quite distinct from the French pattern they claim to imitate. Indeed, French speakers find the stretched final syllable aligned with the complete trochee just as difficult to perform as they do the reduced initial syllable.

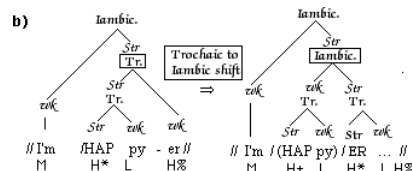
The exceptional character of the pseudo-iamb on these borrowed words along with the socio-linguistic connotations associated with the non-native vocabulary on which the pattern generally occurs, ensures that unmotivated shifts to the right(or forms that remain unshifted to the left) will tend to be received as expressing a marked social attitude. Unshifted *ga'rage* can be judged as prestige ‘foreign-and-aristocratic’ or as simply ‘snobbish’ according to the social stand-point of the listener. Indeed, word pairs which differ by application, or non-application of the leftward shift, the non-shifted forms show a similar narrower marked interpretation, tending to convey over-tones of over-refinement, when compared to the shifted form.

- 20 a) li'queur (sweet ‘over-refined’ after-dinner drink) ~  
 b) ‘liquor (any alcoholic drink, the ‘hard stuff’)  
 21 a) gen'teel (striving to convey a refined manner, affecting prudish refinement). b) ‘gentle’

It is on this linguistic back-ground that the authors of a socially satirical British Television “soap” (*Keeping up Appearances*), play, when they have a social climber, a “Mrs Violet ‘Bucket’” (with functional but “ill smelling” associations to her Anglo-Saxon name), right shift herself to become the “sweet smelling and refined”, “Violet Bou'quet” (creating a pseudo word-pair, *bouquet/bucket*, similar to 20 a/b, above).

The rarity of any type of right-ward shift must contribute to the unexpected, and therefore, marked status of these forms. Even, information-structure based right-ward shifts are rare on the word level; although, I recently discovered this contrastive shift, on the suffix of “happier”, in a television interview.

22. a) *Joseph*: It DIDN't make ME (HAPpy).  
*L.Th.*: Yeah, and ARE you (HAPpy) NOW?  
*Joseph*: I'm (HAPpy)-ER. I'm MORE aLIVE.  
 (*Louis Theroux's Weird Weekends, BBC Prime*)

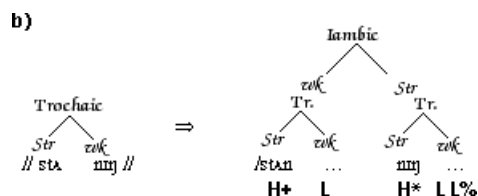


Other cases of English speakers affecting a ‘right-ward ho!’ shift are even more rare in English; but I found this example of an actor (using affected RP speech, in a satirical BBC programme “That Week”), imposing this shift as a significant distortion [4].

A clear idea of the emphatic affectation produced by this can be obtained from this passage in (23 a) in which the word “stunning” occurs twice, once in the expected Left-strong pattern, and then again with the ‘distorted’ Right-shifted pattern (23 b), akin to Bolinger’s accent of power(note the affected pseudo-stammer).

23. a) “That Week” :

- Affected RP 1: “Oh I say the Tate is exhibiting some fine examples of surrealist work these days.”  
 Affected RP 2: “Isn’t it just! I mean look at this one the influence, hem, pure Dali!”  
 Affected RP 1: “Oh absolutely., the sagging brown ink-blot on wall with no framing; t-terrible, t-terribly, avant-garde! “  
 Affected RP 2: Eh, s-STUNning, absolutely s-stunNING!



#### 5. Conclusion

The English tendency to structure in trochees and super-trochees, even across syntactic borders, goes beyond rhythmic stereotypes: although syntactic based iambic groupings do exist, alternative rhythm based super-trochaic patterns also occur, similar to the British-school initial-strong “heads”.

#### 6. References

- [1] Fonagy, I., et al., 1983. Clichés mélodiques. *Societas linguistica Europea*, 273-303.
- [2] Giegerich H., 1992. *English Phonology*. Cambridge University Press.
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