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 rhythmical 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 inducive 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) STR1 | Trochaic STR wk
   un peTIT / coCHON | /EEni / MEEni / MiNi / MO É
   pendu AU / plaFOND | /CATCH a /Tiger / BY the / TOÉ2

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

1 Anapaests are complex iamb as Dactyls are complex trochees (see 17).
2 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.

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] (kVS
kVS r/Vs 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

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
infixed intensifier must split the Head it modifies into
plausible trochees, and the infixed 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) *Asbo-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
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 inversed 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.

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 “Tifer”; 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'ampəni]), to visually code the attack consonant <C-> (= [k]), plus the Dactylic (foot-level) rhyme as <o.> (= [amən]). This abbreviation, <Tho.,> treats the unaccentuated two syllable word <any>, literally, as a suffix to the preceding stressed word <thump>, as shown in (17).

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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
g₀ / rₐ₃ₐ₅
19) <garage> a) g₀ / rₐ₃ₐ₅ b) /ₐ₄ₐ₅ c) /ₐ₅ₐ₃ₐ₅

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 shifted forms show a similar narrower marked interpretation, to be received as expressing a marked social attitude.

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 Dalí!”
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-stun-NING!

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