

The evolution of prosody through songs: The case of English broadside ballads

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The study of verse and music, as well as of their interaction in song, has contributed enormously to the evolution of suprasegmental phonology. Since the early nineties, Optimality Theory (OT) has established itself as one of the major theoretical frameworks in segmental phonology. It has recently expanded to cover the fields of suprasegmental phonology and text-setting. In the last ten years, several significant papers about the relationship between linguistic prosody, verse prosody and text-setting have been published by Dell and Halle (in press), Hayes and Kaun (1996), Kiparsky (2006), and Rodríguez-Vázquez (2007a; in press), among others. These papers are primarily concerned with contemporary folk verse and song. In order to check the validity of the theoretical assumptions and empirical observations made by OT and devise a comprehensive theory of text-setting, it is crucial to analyse songs dating from previous stages in the history of specific languages. This paper engages in the exploration of text-tune correspondences in a corpus of seventeenth-century English broadside ballads. Although broadside ballads are often taken as an important source of information on popular, social, political, and religious culture, when analysed also as songs, they can give us important information about the phonological structure of the English language at specific historical points, as well as its evolution. In this paper, the close analysis of the principles that regulated how ballads were set to music will show a direct link to the specific constraints about stress and syllable structure of the language. The two prosodic elements on which the analysis will focus will be (i) the match/mismatch of syllables and beats and (ii) the setting of one syllable to more than one pitch (“melisma”). Bearing in mind the musical setting of the ballads is essential in order to analyse syllabic prominence, and thus find out what the evolution of the prosody of the language has been since the Early Modern Period. The analysis of a corpus of broadside ballads will thus contribute to a deeper knowledge and understanding of issues related to the long-discussed dichotomy between stress- and syllable-timed languages and, more broadly, the “generally neglected consequences of rhythm in language variation and change”.

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- Hayes, Bruce & Abigail Kaun (1996) “The role of phonological phrasing in sung and chanted verse”. *The Linguistic Review* 13:243-303.
- Kiparsky, Paul (2006) “A modular metrics of folk verse”. Eds. Elan B. Dresher and Nila Friedberg. *Formal approaches to poetry*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 7-52.
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