

## 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 minimality 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 lines or verse texts is known as 'meter'. This abstract template is commonly identifiable in verse forms such as songs and poetry from prosodic regularities involving rhythm, phrasing and quantity (Hayes 1988). As far as rhythm in linguistic studies is concerned, poetic meter might be either rhythmic meters that normally adjust 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) noticed a quantitative meter that restricts the quantity of syllables per line. Building on earlier 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 within an Optimality Theory approach (henceforth OT) originated by Prince and Smolensky (1993). In order to create a framework for the study, two questions have been taken into consideration:

- 1- What is the relationship between non-rhythmic meter and ordinary language phonology?
- 2- How can non-rhythmic meter in Soqotri poetry be generated using OT?

The next section of the study will present a detailed description of the meter in Soqotri poetry where the main

aspects are highlighted. There follows a section that provides a general background on generative theory and the study of versification with particular focus on poetic meter. Then a further section offers a formal analysis of the meter of Soqotri poetry in parallel OT. The analysis and its findings are summarised in the conclusion, which found in the last section.

### 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):

<b>TÓMRE MEŠĀNKÉRO</b>	<b>A WONDROUS PALM</b>
1) Watered Wa-təy ší'ho lə-ħa tāmre	I have one palm tree here,
2) Di-məf'ák šəžaréno	A wondrous green one,
3) Di-hiníyo bə-di-kašá'yhon	Planted in di-Kasayhon,
4) Di-šóuša bə-šħaf di-'érhon	with goat's milk,
5) Dəmədəmən bə-'ərbéto	With milk-foam settling at its roots.
6) Wa-núbot ləl təfáləħ šəm	It is pollinated when the sun rises
7) Wa-ləl təndəyrər kóuša	And when the sun sets, one picks the fruit.
8) Wa-gédəħ tho sé'e 'əyyúg	Nine men came to visit me—
9) Wa-kála'k həyħən təd šémrah	I tossed them a cluster.
10) Wa-máža <sup>s</sup> dəg wa-dəg zénog	One ate a bit, another took a bit with him,
11) Wa-mən-ħa di-gó'or éntəf	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 σ	Total
Wa- / təy / ší' / ho / lə- / ħa / tām / re	[8]
Di- / mə / f'ák / šə / ža / ré / no	[7]
Di- / hi / ní / yo / bə- / di- / ka / šá <sup>s</sup> / yhon	[9]
Di- / šóu / ša / bə- / šħaf / di- / 'ér / hon	[8]
Də / mə / də' / mən / bə- / 'er / bé / to	[8]
Wa- / nú / bot / ləl / tə / fá / ləħ / šəm	[8]

This present research will discuss that the meter of Soqotri poetry constrains size over the prosodic constituents, the syllable. The size constraints demand the metrical constituent that is the line should have exactly eight syllables. Indeed, the domain of the size constraints is the line.

## 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 mora or syllable) 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 controls the prominence and size 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 account to the typology and theory of versification considers linguistics, both as a source of explanatory principles and as a methodological model (Kiparsky 2020: 659). Generative metrics hold the idea that poetry is based on similar principles as non-poetic language, where the same tool can be used to analyse the poetic meter and prosody. In fact, this is what Fabb (2010) referred to as the ‘Development Hypothesis’ and recently Blumenfeld (2015) called it ‘The Grounding Hypothesis’. This hypothesis develops from the broad generative principles of minimalism in which the minimum number of constraints are highly favored. Based on this hypothesis, the poetic meter should not be assessed 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 perspective, this research will assess the meter of Soqotri poetry by offering a markedness analysis within Optimality Theory (OT) (Prince and Smolensky 1993, Aloufi 2021).

## SOQOTRI POETRY METER AN OT ACCOUNT

This section offers an appropriate account 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 line size, and not any prosodic constituent size below the line, hence this meter lacks 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 current study will consider that the meter in Soqotri poetry is a pure size meter that limits the line size 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 poet-ic 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, these constraints are generally used in ordinary language phonology to enforce maximality and minimality requirements (Broselow 1982, DeLacy 2008). **MaxMolecule** and **MinMolecule** constraints will be used to define size requirements in Soqotri poetry meter that regulates the line size and sets the same target for every line of the poems by the 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.

In addition to the above mentioned size constraints, the following faithfulness constraint, **Faith**, is required to prevent the occurrence of epenthesis or deletion (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.

For the ranking of the faithfulness and markedness constraints, the Faith constraint must be ranked above all the markedness size constraints so as to prevent deletion or epenthesis.

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#### Wa-ṭəy šíʔho ɭə-ḥa tòmre FAITH MinLine MaxLine

σ σ σ σ σ σ σ	!*	*
a) Wa- / ṭəy / šíʔ / ho / ɭə- / ḥa / tòm		
σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ	!*	*
b) Wa- / ṭəy / šíʔ / ho / ɭə- / ḥa / tòm / re / re		
σ σ σ σ σ σ σ σ		
→c) Wa- / ṭəy / šíʔ / ho / ɭə- / ḥa / tòm / re		

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Furthermore, no violation for the markedness size constraints **MinLine** and **MaxLine**. The above tableau, shows the evaluation of the line in Soqotri poem demonstrating the interaction between the markedness constraints and the faithfulness constraint.

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) is the optimal candidate, since it faithfully satisfies all the size constraints as well as the faithfulness constraint. Indeed, the basic ranking of markedness and faithfulness constraints that are efficient for deriving the meter in Soqotri poetry is: **FAITH**>> **MinLine**, **MaxLine**. In summary, this OT account supports the essential assumption to generative metrics, that poetic meter and general phonology 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 evidently constrain the size at the level of the line. The markedness-based account is efficient of suggesting parametric definitions of constraints deriving the meter of Soqotri poetry that can evidently set the line size, satisfying the present study aim. Furthermore, it is in line with the development hypothesis, with the usage of constraints and representations that are already found in the ordinary language phonology, and captures similarities between the prosody of non-poetic language and poetic meter. In summary, specific size constraints invoked in the analysis and substantial ranking arguments have been considered in order to enforce the maximality and minimality requirements in the poetic meter. This analysis might be used to offer a better clarification for other languages with non-rhythmic meters such as Sulawesi poetry.

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