

***How does the mind do literary work?***  
Bi-Directional perspectives in the Cognitive Science  
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Gary Thoms  
University of Strathclyde  
gary.s.thoms@strath.ac.uk

Stefano Versace  
University of Milan  
stefano.versace@unimi.it

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1. **Questions**

- How do literary forms work?
- Are there specialized grammars for poetry?
- How do we process literary forms?

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2. **A proposal**

- **(Literary) forms have features that are best spelled out as separate, non-functionally-related domains**
- **A modular theory of cognition provides a unified framework for looking at literature as a practice exploiting very different kinds of forms (i.e meter, syntax, semantics and so on)**

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3. **METER**

- Meter is a set of rules and conditions that controls both the length of the lines and the placement of some stresses
- This is achieved by computing over a representation of phonological structure, which is not phonology proper
- *Endecasillabo*, the most common meter in the Italian tradition → 10 metrical positions, but the number of syllables in a verseline need not coincide with the number of metrical positions
- *Beatrice*, or syllables and lines. The same diphthong in (b) and (c), but a different parsing

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Δ  
(a) *Nel méz.zo del cam.mín di nós.tra ví.ta*    →10 syll.  
(Dante, *Inferno*, I, 1)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Δ  
(b) *fe.dìr tor.ne.a.mèn.ti e còr.rer giòs.tra;* →11 syll.  
(Dante, *Inferno*, XXII: 6)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Δ  
(c) *La nò.bi.le vir.tù Be.a.trì.ce in.tèn.de* →12syll.  
(Dante, *Purgatorio*, XVIII: 73)

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- **LINGUISTIC RHYTHM and METER** → they are best spelled out as separated forms: the kind of prominence assigned by the meter is not always consistent with linguistic prominence;

STRESS σ Σ σ Σ σ Σ σ Σ σ Σ σ  
(a2) *Nel mézzo del cammín di nóstra víta* (Dante, *Inferno*, I, 1)

STRESS Σ σ Σ σ σ Σ σ Σ σ Σ σ  
(d) *ésta sélva selvággia e áspra e fórte* (Dante, *Inferno*, I, 4)

N.B.

σ= unstressed syllable

Σ= stressed syllable

- The two lines significantly differ from the point of view of linguistic rhythm, still they are perfectly metrical *endecasillabi*

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- **METER DOES NOT DEPEND ON SEMANTIC FORM either;**

→ semantic complexity does not create metrical complexity:

(e) *nel tèmpo che colùì che 'l mòndo schiàra* (Dante, *Inferno*, XXVI)  
'In the time that the one that the world enlightens'

- The two recursively embedded sentences in (e) do not affect the meter, which is straightforwardly iambic

- In *LOOSE METRICAL FORMS* (see Fabb & Halle 2008), meter does not control all the syllables in a line;

→ I.e., phonological form does not coincide with metrical form

Eugenio Montale (cf. Montale 1984) → loose *endecasillabi*:

(f) *E tu seguìssi le fràgili architettùre* (E. Montale, *Notizie dall'Amiata*, II: 1)

(g) *Tu non ricordi la casa dei doganieri* (E. Montale, *La casa dei doganieri*, 1)

↓

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Δ
(f1)	<i>E</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>se.guìs.si</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>frà.gi.li</i>	<i>ar.chi.tet.tù.re</i>							

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Δ
(g1)	<i>Tu</i>	<i>non</i>	<i>ri.còr.di</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>cà.sa</i>	<i>dei</i>	<i>do.ga.niè.ri</i>						

- A traditional theory of meter is not able to explain:
  - the perceptual similarity between this meter and a canonical *endecasillabo*;
  - their structure;
  - the rules underlying the mental computation leading to such forms;

		↓		↓										
(f2)	<i>E</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>seguìssi</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>fràgili</i>	<i>architettù</i>	<i>(re)</i>						Gridline (GL)	
	(*	*	(*	*]	*	(*	*]	*	(*	*	(*	*]	(	0 ←
		*	)	*		*	)	*		*	*	)		1 ←
			*			*				*	)			2 ←
			)	*						*	)			3 ←
										*				4

(g2)	<i>Tu</i>	<i>non</i>	<i>ricòr.di</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>cà.sa</i>	<i>dei</i>	<i>doganiè</i>	<i>(ri)</i>					GL	
	(*	*	(*	*]	*	(*	*]	*	(*	*	(*	*]	(	0 ←
		*	)	*		*	)	*		*	*	)		1 ←
			*			*				*	)			2 ←
			)	*						*	)			3 ←
										*				4

- Other kinds of *loose* meter may not leave syllables ungrouped, but have a loose control on the grouping instead. A German example (J. W. Goethe, *Römische Elegie*):

(h) *Froh empfind ich mich nun auf klassischem Boden begeistert;* GL  
(\* \* [\* \* \* (\* \* [\* \* \* [\* \* \* [\* \* 0→

(h1) *Vor- und Mitwelt spricht lauter und reizender mir.* GL  
(\* \* [\* \* \* [\* \* \* [\* \* \* (\* 0→

(h2) *Oftmals hab'ich auch schon in ihren Armen gedichtet* GL  
[\* \* [\* \* \* (\* \* [\* \* [\* \* \* [\* \* 0→

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Therefore:

- **METER** is neither a particular setting of linguistic constraints, nor the organization of linguistic rhythm: **instead, it is the output of a specialized computation;**

and

- **METRICAL FORM** is processed separately from phonological, syntactic and semantic form, as well as from any other kind of literary form

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#### 4. SYNTAX

'Me up at does', by e.e. cummings (from *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, p.784)

(h) *Me up at does*  
  
*out of the floor*  
*quietly stare*  
  
*a poisoned mouse*  
  
*still who alive*  
  
*is asking What*  
*have i done that*  
  
*You wouldn't have*

- deviation is central to studies of literary language (e.g. Attridge 1988), but the ways in which deviant language is interpreted is not well understood.
- cummings' text seems chaotic, and is highly deviant, but the sentence is largely unambiguous. How do we reach this unambiguous interpretation?
- proposals for a 'poetic grammar' (Austin 1984) are highly problematic. Some of the movements/constructions in the cummings poem are unlike English grammar (for discussion of focus movement see Rochemont and Culicover 1990).
- motivating the movements in terms of other formal features of the text (rhyme, meter) is also highly problematic. This rearranged version retains the meter and most of the rhyme

(i)            *a poisoned mouse*

*still who alive*  
                 *is asking What*

*have i done that*

*You wouldn't have*

*does quietly*  
                 *stare up at Me*

*out of the floor*

- Rhyme doesn't create syntactic relations. Consider another rearranged form:

(j)            *still is who does*  
                 *out of up stare*  
                 *You wouldn't oor*  
                 *quietly mouse*  
                 *You wouldn't alive*  
                 *done asking What*  
                 *the Me up that*  
                 *have poisoned have*

- an alternative proposal: deviant sentences are given an interpretation via the interaction of separate linguistic systems (syntax, semantics, pragmatics).
- residual syntactic structure maps onto an underspecified and incomplete semantic structure, which forms the basis for pragmatic inferencing, which in turn picks out the interpretation.
- explaining the interpretation of deviant sentences in this way involves no extra linguistic machinery, avoids theoretical difficulties, and comes with additional empirical advantages.
- it also corresponds with readers' intuitive responses to such texts: interpretation is partially inferential, but constrained by some aspects of structure.

## 5. CONCLUSION. *A modular approach*

- **Claim (A)** Meter is the output of a specialized computation; other forms are built upon the interaction of different, still separated, cognitive domains.
  - **Claim (B)** There is no such a thing as a “poetic grammar”; rather we see cognitive input systems jointly operating in processing literature.
  - **Claim (C)** Metrical form is parsed separately from other literary and linguistic forms. Similarly, syntax, semantics and pragmatics operate as separate but interacting domains.
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## 6. References

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