The case against poetic evidence for abstract phonology
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Since the dawn of phonology, linguists have used data from poetry to bolster the case for their view of phonological theory. In particular, scholars have turned their attention to cases where non-identical phonetic segments are treated as equivalent in poetry, e.g. for the purposes of rhyme. Examples include the following:

- Baudouin de Courtenay (1903:312 and elsewhere) argued that rhyme between [i] and [ɪ] in Russian (e.g. [pitkə] – [nitkə]) is to be explained by [i] and [ɪ] being variants of the same psychologically real phoneme.
- Structuralists theorized that distributional facts about phonetic segments were relevant to whether speakers perceived the sounds as ‘similar’ or ‘related’ (Trubetzkoy 1939, Martinet 1936; recently defended and expanded by Hall 2009). This has been used to explain why /a/ and /ö/ are treated as equivalent in Old Norse dróttkvætt poetry (Hreinn Benediktsson 1963).
- Generative phonologists proposed that underlying segments, derived by speakers from morphophonemic alternations, play a part in the poetic systems of many cultures (e.g. Zeps 1963, Watkins 1963, Schane 1968, Kiparsky 1968; 1972; Malone 1982; 1983; 1988; 1996). John Jensen argues that these results support a phonological theory that “makes use of abstract underlying representations and ordered rules” (Jensen 2004:246).
- Stephen R. Anderson (1973) argues that the metrical equivalence of /a/ and /ö/ in Old Norse is to be explained by /ö/ always being derived from an underlying /a/. The rhyme is, thus, defined at an underlying level.
- In David Stampe’s theory of Natural Phonology, claims are made for the significance of the phonemic and morphophonemic levels in poetry. “Systematic phonemic identity, however, is totally irrelevant” (Stampe 1979:81; see also Donegan and Stampe 2009:9).
- Phonologists skeptical of the psychological reality of underlying levels have sought alternative explanations for the poetic phenomena under discussion. In particular, they have emphasized the importance of poetic tradition. Many poetic traditions are uncontroversially divorced from any contemporary phonological reality (see e.g. Baxter 1992:93-94), a possibility which must be taken into consideration when abstract analyses are proposed. For an analysis of the Icelandic material in this spirit see Kristján Árnason 1991. Along similar lines, Alexis Manaster Ramer has proposed a universal that no system of versification can refer to a phonological level more abstract than the phonemic (Manaster Ramer 1981, 1994, 1995; Hoberman and Manaster Ramer 1999)
- In recent research, linguists have focused on phonetic similarity to explain rhyme between non-identical segments (Zwicky 1976, Steriade 2003, Kawahara 2007,
Johnsen 2012). Steriade (2003) explicitly rejects any explanatory value for sound distributions or patterns of alternation in her Romanian data.

In this paper, I will review examples from Icelandic poetry where abstract phonological analyses have been proposed. I will argue that there are no compelling counterexamples to the Manaster Ramer universal in Icelandic poetry and that the cases in question are best explained with poetic traditions and phonetic similarity.

References


Johnsen, Sverre Stausland. 2012. Rhyme acceptability determined by perceived similarity. Handout from a talk given at the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures, National Chiao Tung University, April 2012. Available online.


