

KATJA MELLMANN

Gestalt Theory and Metrical Analysis

The article discusses some possibilities for drawing on hypotheses of a gestalt-theoretical psychology of perception for metrical analysis in literary studies. The analysis of metrical language is first described using Max Wertheimer's term »Realteilung« (real division), in which hypothetical units (feet, bars/measures, lines) are reconstructed without definite knowledge as to whether they were parts of the whole in the first place. The laws of perception in gestalt theory are suggested as a psychological heuristic to facilitate ›real divisions‹ in cases of competing options. Building upon already existing applications of gestalt theory on questions of metrics (Reuven Tsur and the linguistic optimality theory, among others), the article discusses some problems that stem from analyzing quasi-visual structure principles.

The first problem is posed by the commonly assumed equivalence of two- and three-syllable feet (or one- and two-syllable upbeats), which in many cases renders an analysis by ›metrical feet‹ implausible. The gestalt principle of simplicity (as a meta-principle for sub-principles such as similarity, symmetry, etc.), which leads to the division of a text into possibly equal metrical feet, appears unsatisfactory in this light. The alternative suggested here is based on the premise that during subvocalization (i. e. the internal reading-out-loud of a text) the reader of verses tries to create approximately equal measurements of time (bars) rather than trying to visualize a structure of metrical feet. Thus, a principle of analysis that draws on measuring time and stress is regarded as primary in terms of perception psychology. The principle of metrical feet is not entirely abandoned by this, but will remain relevant in many cases, especially in historical intentional analyses (i. e. asking for the structure intended by the poet). The principle of time measurement and stress, however, is understood to require fewer presuppositions and can in some cases prevail over the reader's perception despite the poet's intention.

A second problem arises when texts are anachronistically re-analyzed in terms of feet and bars when they were originally following syllabic measurements. Therefore, a new gestalt principle is suggested: the concept of ›graspable size‹ (»fassliche Größe«) can explain why smaller units (e. g. metrical feet) are apparently preferred to larger ones (e. g. lines). This principle can be deduced from the cerebral processing of acoustic stimuli in the human brain.

Thirdly, the article discusses whether it is really the similarity of sub-units that creates simplicity or optimality, or whether there are certain progression patterns that provide for simplicity or optimality. The tetrameter serves as an example which is most often regarded as a binary (and therefore especially simple) metrical pattern. It is argued that instead of assuming a binary structure with two similar halves (AA), a complementary structure XB should be assumed that consists of

openings and closings of verses. This assumption is supported by the fact that variation more often occurs in verse openings than in verse closings, and that typical closing figures (»Klauseln«) can often be found.

In this article, such closing figures are understood to be signals for gestalt closure (which serve a time-bound auditive perception better than a merely synchronically graspable sequence of similarly structured elements), for which an explanation is attempted that uses the idea of »conceptual metaphors« by Lakoff and Johnson. In this light, the adonic verse at the end of a hexameter, paused lifts and parasitic feet appear to be metaphorical (body mimetical) figures of deceleration. Hypercatalectic verse endings, long lines at the end of a stanza, and other forms appear as metaphorical figures for weighing down or pedestal formation. Other signals for gestalt closure are pauses, which according to the gestalt principle of proximity divide elements that do not belong together while connecting elements that do, and the principle of variation in penultimate position as described by Tsur.

The last part of this article refers again to these closing figures in order to examine the usefulness of the principles suggested for text analysis. The poem *Sachliche Romanze* by Erich Kästner serves as an example. This poem is structured in demotic tetrameter, that has been identified as an especially optimal (as they follow the criteria of time-measuring stress pattern, graspable size and gestalt closure through closing figures), if not potentially universal metrical pattern. At the same time, the poem uses this simple structure in a sophisticated manner, which creates a special effect through a few deviations in the final stanza. This particular effect, as the analysis attempts to show, is achieved through a complex interplay of gestalt closure and delay of closure, which could not be reconstructed without referring to the principles of perception established in this article.

Literatur

- Herbert Bögl, *Abriss der mittelhochdeutschen Metrik*, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 2006.
- Dieter Breuer, *Deutsche Metrik und Versgeschichte* [1981], München ⁴1999.
- Dieter Burdorf, *Einführung in die Gedichtanalyse*, Stuttgart/Weimar 1995.
- Robbins Burling, The metrics of children's verse. A cross-linguistic study, *American Anthropologist* 68 (1966), 1418–1441.
- Seymour Chatman, *A Theory of Meter*, Den Haag 1965.
- Nigel Fabb, *Linguistics and Literature. Language in the Verbal Arts of the World*, Oxford/Malden, MA 1997.
- Horst J. Frank, *Handbuch der deutschen Strophenformen* [1980], Tübingen/Basel ²1993.
- Chris Golston/Tomas Riad, The phonology of Classical Greek meter, *Linguistics* 38 (2000), 99–167.

- Bruce Hayes/Margaret MacEachern, Quatrain form in English folk verse, *Language* 74 (1998), 287–335.
- Andreas Heusler, *Deutsche Versgeschichte. Mit Einschluß des altenglischen und altnordischen Stabreimverses* [1925–29], 3 Bde., Berlin ²1956.
- Kurt Koffka, Experimental-Untersuchung zur Lehre vom Rhythmus, *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 52 (1909), 1–109.
- George Lakoff/Mark Johnson, *Leben in Metaphern. Konstruktion und Gebrauch von Sprachbildern* [1980]. Aus dem Amerikanischen übersetzt von Astrid Hildenbrand, Heidelberg ⁵2007.
- Heinrich Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik. Eine Einführung für Studierende der klassischen, romanischen, englischen und deutschen Philologie* [1963], Ismaning ¹⁰1990.
- Erwin Leibfried, *Kritische Wissenschaft vom Text. Manipulation, Reflexion, transparente Poetologie* [1970], Stuttgart ²1972.
- Björn Lindblom, Final lengthening in speech and music, in: Eva Gåding/Gösta Bruce/Robert Bannert (Hg.), *Nordic Prosody. Papers from a Symposium*, Lund 1978, 85–101.
- Katja Mellmann, Versanalyse, in: Thomas Anz (Hg.), *Handbuch Literaturwissenschaft. Gegenstände – Konzepte – Institutionen*, Bd. 2, Stuttgart/Weimar 2007, 81–97.
- John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush, London 1966.
- Patrizia Noel/Katrin Lindner/Andreas Dufter, The meter of nursery rhymes. Universal versus language-specific patterns, in: David Restle/Dietmar Zaefferer (Hg.), *Sounds and Systems. Studies in Structure and Change*, Berlin 2002, 241–267.
- Patrizia Noel, *Sprachrhythmik in Metrik und Alltagssprache. Untersuchungen zur Funktion des neuhochdeutschen Nebenakzents*, München 2003.
- Hans-Jürgen Schlütter, Der Rhythmus im strengen Knittelvers des 16. Jahrhunderts, *Euphorien* 60 (1966), 48–90.
- Reuven Tsur, *A Perception-Oriented Theory of Metre*, Tel Aviv 1977.
- , *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*, Amsterdam 1992.
- , *Poetic Rhythm. Structure and Performance. An Empirical Study in Cognitive Poetics*, Bern 1998. Online zugänglich auf http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/Rhythm_Book_mpl/Book_folder/TitlePage.html.
- Frederick Turner/Ernst Pöppel, Metered poetry, the brain and time, in: Ingo Rentschler/Barbara Herzberger/David Epstein (Hg.), *Beauty and the Brain. Biological Aspects of Aesthetics*, Basel 1988, 71–90.
- Theo Vennemann, Der Zusammenbruch der Quantität im Spätmittelalter und sein Einfluß auf die Metrik, in: Hans Fix (Hg.), *Quantitätsproblematik und Metrik. Greifswalder Symposium zur germanischen Grammatik*, Amsterdam 1995, 185–223.
- Christian Wagenknecht, Die Quadratur des Kreises. Zur Lehre von der Vierhebigkeit des Reimpaarverses [1984], in: ders., *Metrica minora. Aufsätze, Vorträge, Glossen zur deutschen Prosodie*, Paderborn 2006, 23–37.
- Rainer Warning, *Lektüren romanischer Lyrik. Von den Trobadors zum Surrealismus*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1997.

Full-length article in: JLT 2/2 (2008), 251-270.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Katja Mellmann, Die metrische Gestalt. Mit Überlegungen zur Sinnfälligkeit des Viertakters.

In: JLTonline (16.09.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000769

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000769>