

Bimoraic Feet and Metrical Resolution in Early Middle English Alliterative Verse

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The proper analysis of historical English foot structure has been a point of much debate. Some have argued that both Old English (Minkova 2006) and Middle English (Minkova 2016) have a prosodic system based on a syllabic trochee, while others favour either a moraic trochee (Bermúdez-Otero 2005) or a special foot type known as the Germanic Foot (Dresher and Lihiri 1991). In this paper I provide additional empirical evidence to suggest that English showed a moraic trochee during the crucial transition period often labelled 'early Middle English' (c. 1150-1250). This data comes from the poem *Brut* by Lazamon (Layamon, Lawman), a 16 000-line work partly in alliterating verse and partly in rhyming poetry. Building on the work of Yakovlev (2008), and focusing especially on the line-final position, I attempt to show that words like *hauene* 'haven (dative)' or *makede* 'made', with two initial light syllables followed by a schwa, behave metrically parallel to heavy trochees such as *kinge* 'king (dative)' or *sōhte* 'sought'. Both types of words are favoured at the ends of 'standard' verses. By contrast, words such as *sune* 'son' or *gode* 'god (dative)' show a markedly different metrical distribution, and are instead parallel to heavy monosyllables such as *king* 'king (nominative)' or *slōh* 'slew'. This strongly suggests that Lazamon consistently employed the principle of metrical resolution, whereby two light syllables (or potentiall a light-heavy sequence, though relevant examples are less frequent in the *Brut*) are equivalent to a single heavy syllable. This data raises several interesting questions of interpretation, including how we should make metrical generalizations in a poem like the *Brut*, whose metre is rather irregular and only partly understood, and to what extent metrical resolution can be used as evidence for a phonological equivalence of two monomoraic syllables and a single bimoraic syllable (i.e. as evidence for a bimoraic foot such as a moraic trochee). I argue that these are challenging problems, but not insurmountable. A holistic and contextualized review of all the early Middle English evidence suggests that Lazamon's metrical resolution is most economically explained as a further manifestation of the moraic trochee (and not the syllabic trochee), formed from left-to-right, as the dominant prosodic unit of early Middle English. This helps us securely establish a picture of English prosody just as English was beginning to incorporate the large number of French (and later, Latin) words that would eventually trigger changes to the prosodic system.

References

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