

## Dual metrics in Tsjêbbe Hettinga's poetry

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Tsjêbbe Hettinga (1949-2013) was no doubt among the most well-known Frisian poets ever, also outside of the Frisian-speaking area.<sup>1</sup> His popularity is usually ascribed to the way he performed his own work on stage; his breakthrough was at the Frankfurt Book Fair of 1993. "Although practically no one in the listening crowd understood a word—even the Dutch don't know Frisian—they were greatly moved by the airs of the unknown poet," the Frisian literary critic Piter Yedema (2009) wrote. "No language barrier existed anymore. The people were caught up by the deeper layers of the poetry: the vocals and consonants, the syllables, the melody, the colour, by all of which they could create their own images. Triumph of the archaic, victory of the oral."

It is indeed this exceptional 'musicality' of Hettinga's work that is virtually always mentioned in reviews. In later years, his books of poetry were often accompanied by a cd with those performances. It seems that there was a feeling among his audience that one did not really need to understand every word which the poet says – that the 'music' of the language was enough.

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of what this constituted this 'musicality'; in particular we will look at the organization of the poetic line at the metrical level. I claim that Hettinga's work was structured here at parallel levels: his lines were at the same time syllable-counting and stress counting. I show that this is very similar to the structure of some of Dylan Thomas's work, such as *Fern Hill* (which has been translated by Hettinga) or *Poem in October*. I then move from the abstract metrical structure to the level of the actual performance, and I show how Hettinga interpreted the two-layer structure, and what this added to the overall impression of the poems.

### 1. Frisian metrics

Frisian is a West-Germanic language spoken in the Netherlands; it nowadays is considered the 'second official language' of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, although its official use is restricted to the Province of Fryslân. It has a distinct literary tradition which traces back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, although it only really became a 'tradition' in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Very few poetic texts are known from before this period.

Oppewal *et al.* (2006) gives a history of Frisian literature; I do not know of any explicit study into the history of Frisian metrics. Metrical structure in Frisian since the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century seems to parallel that of Dutch in many ways, and about this we know some more (e.g. Kasartsev 2010). Gysbert Japicx (1603-1666) wrote a rather extensive oeuvre in a Dutch Renaissance style; like other 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch authors he experimented with 'verse feet' like *iamb*s and *trochee*s, and stanza

1 Thanks to the audience at the first *Day of Frisian Literature*, to Reina Boerrigter, Nigel Fabb, and Teake Oppewal for help and insightful comments.

structures that consisted of lines which could vary in their length. As a rather arbitrary example, here is one such stanza from *Friesche rymlerye* (1681):

- (1) (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Ljeafd', wirdste Ljeafde', oer-schienenste Bijld,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Puwck, boppa Sinn' oef Dey,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Nin Faem, hoe moy, dijn glanz' besijll't*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Op tuwzen mijle ney.*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Yen strieltje' uwt dijn blier eag, ick tjuwg,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Tjocht dat ick ney dy stjoer,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Jâ ijn dijn ljeafde baern in fljueg,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Az Migge' yn 't Kersse-fjoer.*

*W* and *s* designate *weak* and *strong* syllables in the metrical template, respectively. A *ws* sequence is called an *iamb* in the metrical literature (Fabb 2015). Lines in this poem thus alternately have three or four iambs. The positions are more or less aligned to word stress, but this alignment does not need to be perfect. The first syllable of the poem, *Ljeafd'*, clearly has stress and emphasis, even if it occurs in a weak position.; similarly the words *Tjocht dat* in the sixth line have the opposite stress pattern (*ws*) of what the metrical line implies; but such 'reversals' are allowed at the beginning of lines in all West Germanic traditions (see e.g. Halle and Keyser 1971 for this phenomenon in Shakespeare).

Another way in which the metrical pattern and the language deviate is that a word ends in a vowel and the following word starts with a vowel, those two can be taken together in one position (e.g. *Ljeafde' oerschienste* in line 1, *strieltje' uwt* in line 5). Again, this phenomenon of hiatus resolution ('synalepha') is quite common in metrical verse also in other traditions (Thoms and Versace 2011).

Although iambic verse became the standard for metrical poetry for a long time, iambic *pentameter* (lines consisting of five iambs) became only the standard in Dutch poetry in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the discovery of Shakespeare (De Jager 1996). It seems to me that again Frisian poets followed this tradition after a short while, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became the dominant metre. The following is the first quatrain of a poem by Obe Postma (1868-1963):

- (2) (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*Ik sis net: heger as de piramidebou,*  
 (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
*En duorjender as koper sis ik net.*

(w s) (w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
 't Woechs út it flakke lân stil nei de sinne op  
 (w s)( w s)(w s)(w s)(w s)  
 En 't is net sterker as de minskene hert.

("I do not say: higher than the construction of pyramids, and I do not say more resistant than copper. It grew out of the flat country up to the sun and it is not stronger than the human heart.")

We find similar kinds of deviations from the regular pattern as in Japicx, like a strong syllable at the beginning of the fourth line. Also the second line has two unstressed syllables in a row (the last two of *duorjender*) that still seem to occupy an iamb. On the other hand, hiatus resolution is no longer an issue: '*sinne op*' in the third line occupies three positions, rather than two, as would have been the case in Japicx. All of this is representative of Frisian and Dutch metrics of this period (Verwey 1931).

## 2. Hettinga and syllable counting verse

It is clear that Hettinga's work looks very different. These are the first lines of *It weinhûs* ('The Waggon House'):

- (3) Knibbel op it lid binne de bûnte lapen fan 'e simmer  
 Ta de ferknûkele koffer fan 'e ûnwennichheid yntroppe.  
 In nuffield – reade eamel yn in wietgrien bitefjild – ploeget  
 Him, stinnend yn de hege motorlûden, troch de wjerstribbichheid  
 Fan iuwen klaai, jierren fan strie, dei dy't tusken twa seizoenen  
*Knieret. Seefûgels fermoedzje fisken, noch, fine skulpen, oergeunst.*  
 (" The knee on the lid has stuffed the multicoloured rags of summer  
 Away in the jumbled suitcase of unfamiliar nostalgia.  
 A Nuffield – red ant in a wet-green field of beets – now ploughs itself,  
 Groaning deeply in its high-pitched engine noises, through  
 The stubbornness of centuries of clay, years of straw, a day that hinges  
 Between two seasons. Seagulls suspect the presence of fish, still, find shells,  
 Envy." Translation James Brockway)

Two things are immediately striking, both of them typical for Hettinga's work. First, there is no way in which these lines can be plausibly be scanned into iambs, trochees (*sw*) or other type of foot. Already the first four words (*Knibbel op it lid*) represent a *s w w w s* pattern that is basically impossible to fit into any binary pattern. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that there is some measurable regularity in these lines: all odd-numbered lines have 16 syllables, all even-numbered lines have 17. (As in Postma, synalepha is not resolved: *reade eamel* in the third line counts as four syllables):

- (4) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16  
*Knibbel op it lid binne de bûnte lapen fan 'e simmer*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17  
*Ta de ferknûkele koffer fan 'e ûnwennichheid yntroppe.*

This is quite surprising in at least two ways. First of all, pure syllable counting verse has never been very popular in any continental West Germanic language, although it does play an important role, for instance, in Romance languages such as Italian and, in particular, French (Gouvard 2000). In the latter language, for instance, one of the classical line shapes is that of the *alexandrin* in which every line consists of exactly 12 syllables, with an obligatory ‘caesura’ (word or phrase boundary) between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> syllable, marked here by a | symbol:

(5) *Il est ce que tu dis, | s'il embrasse leur foi*  
*Mais il est mon époux, | et tu parles à moi*  
(‘He is what you say he is if he chooses their religion  
But he is my husband, and you are talking to me.’)  
(Pierre Corneille, *Polyeucte* 3.II)

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, some Dutch poets tried to write verse such as these, but the process never caught on; the Dutch *alexandrijn* consists of 6 iambic feet instead, which in the end also has 12 syllables, but organized in an alternating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, and without the caesura (Kossmann 1963). There is supposedly a reason why French poetry has syllable count as an organizing principle whereas Germanic poetry does not: also French linguistic rhythm is completely organized around the syllable: French is a prime example of a syllable-timing language in the sense that every syllable has (more or less) equal duration. Furthermore, the language does not have lexical word stress (there is an accent on the last syllable of every phrase) and French speakers are therefore ‘stress deaf’. This contrasts strongly with Germanic languages, including Dutch and Frisian, which are stress-timed (unstressed syllables are much shorter than stressed syllables; it is the distance between two stressed syllables that is more or less stable in the speech signal) (Nespor *et al.* 2011).

It is therefore rather surprising that Hettinga’s metrical system seems based on syllable-count. This becomes rather more surprising if we take into account the length of these lines: alexandrins count as already rather long, and they have ‘only’ 12 syllables, which are furthermore divided into 2 x 6.

One influential idea by Fabb (2015) is that the reason why the line presumably is the one characteristic which poetry has in all traditions, is because it is a unit which fits in working memory. The listener to poetry can keep a line in her head to consider its aesthetic qualities, and its internal organization. Lines of 17 syllables are too long for this, especially if there is no further (foot) structure, although Fabb (p.c.) assures me that it might still fit.

Given these surprising qualities, one might wonder whether the regularity we found is real or just an accidental property. However, we find this in all of Hettinga’s work, at least that of the last few decades in his life. The lines are sometimes somewhat

shorter (and occasionally even longer), but very often we even find the alternation between lines of  $n$  syllables and lines of  $n+1$  syllables:

- (6) *Moarn sil it foar ivich maitiid wêze, mar nacht is it no.* (15)  
*De moanne – de siel fan immen dy't stjert yn it tsjuster –* (14)  
*Is fol, en dronken as de paden tusken de doarpen, oer* (15)  
*Swarte piramiden fan pleatsen, fingerwizingen* (14)  
("Tomorrow it will be forever spring, but now it is night.  
The moon – the soul of someone dying in the dark – is  
Full, and drunken as the path from village to village, she has  
Been flung over black pyramids of farmhouses, over  
Pointed fingers"  
Translation: James Brockway).

But also other patterns occur; in *De blauwe hauk van Wales* all stanzas have the structure 5 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 14 / 6:

- (7) *It is slim simmer,* (5)  
*En de sinne winkt dizze middei mei it ljocht dat earst* (14)  
*Op de griene harpen fan 'e heuvels syn grûntoan fynt.* (14)  
*Hossebossend rydt it de gapjende weinspoaren del* (14)  
*Nei de giele hypotenusa's fan 't nôt dat rustket* (14)  
*As, fierwei, de twatalige brêge oer de Severn,* (14)  
*Of, no, de Devilsbridge oer de Towy, dy't mei koele* (14)  
*Fingers myn nûtbrune boerefaam har boarsten opnimt,* (14)  
*Wylst tusken krúsbeien ferburgen eagen strune nei* (14)  
*De stream dy't ûntspringt op 'e hichten fan 'e ikebeam.* (14)  
*Triljen tilt it hoarnfee.* (6)  
(" It is cruel summer,  
And this afternoon the sun beckons with the light, finding  
Only now on the green harps of the hills its true key-note.  
Rocking and shaking, it rides down the gaping waggon-tracks  
Towards the yellow hypotenuses of the wheat, turning to  
Rust, as, far away, the two-tongued bridge over the Severn  
Stands, or now, the Devil's Bridge over the Towy, whose cool  
Fingers take hold of the breasts of my tawny farmgirl, and  
Hidden eyes from among the gooseberry bushes, spy on  
The river which rises from its source on the oak-tree heights.  
The horned cattle shimmering."  
Translation: James Brockway).

The unusual nature of syllable counting in Dutch and Frisian traditions may provide the explanation why it has so far not been detected in the literature. That it is real, can also be shown on the basis of the Dutch translations which Hettinga made of his own work, in cooperation with the Dutch poet Berno Barnard. In the following

examples from the translation of *De blauwe hauk van Wales* we see some small shifts that can only be explained as attempts to keep the right number of syllables:

- (8) *En de sinne winkt dizze middei mei it ljocht dat earst*  
En de zon wenkt deze middag met het licht dat **pas** eerst

The Frisian word for *sun* (*sinne*) has two syllables, whereas its Dutch counterpart (*zon*) has only one; this is solved by adding an almost meaningless particle to the Dutch version (*pas eerst* means the same thing as *eerst*, viz. 'at first'; it should be noted, though that apparently in Frisian the combination *pas eerst* cannot be made). Something similar we find in the following example:

- (9) *Nei de griene hypotenusas fan 't nôt dat rustket*  
Naar de groene hypotenusas van **het** graan dat roest

Again, the Frisian verb *rustket* ('rust') has two syllables, against monosyllabic Dutch *roest*. In this case, the disparity is solved because the translation uses a non-reduced determiner *het* for the reduced Frisian determiner 't.

The last example may be the most spectacular:

- (10) *As, fierwei, de twatalige brêge oer de Severn,*  
**Of**, no, de Devilsbridge oer de Towy, dy't mei koele  
Als, ver, de tweetalige brug **over** de Severn, **of**  
Nu, de Devilsbridge **over** de Towy, die met koele

The first of these two lines has two words which are bisyllabic in Frisian (*fierwei*, *brêge*) and monosyllabic in Dutch (*ver*, *brug*). On the other hand Dutch *over* is one syllable longer than Frisian *oer*, compensating for one 'missing' syllable. However, in order to add yet another syllable, the conjunction *of* 'or' is moved from the beginning of the second line to the end of the first one (and the syllabic disparity which that threatens to cause is solved by another *over/oer* pair). Clearly, there is no semantic reason for this movement of *of*. The word has the same meaning in the two languages, and it is unclear how its effect changes by this jump; the only reason can be syllable count.

### 3. The dual structure of Hettinga's lines

Having thus established that Hettinga's poetry is syllable-counting, we can observe that nevertheless stress-counting seems to play a role as well. In particular, we can distinguish in every line a fixed number of stresses.

Different from syllable counting, stress counting is not unusual in Germanic languages. We know it existed in Old English poetry (11) and it still characterizes a lot of English (and other Germanic) rap music (12):

- (11) *Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,*  
*meotodes meahte, ond his modgeþanc,*

*weorc wuldorfæder— swa he wundra gehwæs,*  
(Caedmon's Hymn)

- (12) *Some **people claim** that I'm **born to play**  
Cause I'm your **Icetea** on the **sunny day**  
I make the **goers come**, the **leavers stay**  
I make the **lovers kids** and the **workers play**.*  
(Ice-T, *The coldest rap*)

In both cases, there are four beats in every line, and the number of stressless syllables in between is irrelevant, although it is seldomly more than two. In both examples lines end with a stressed and rhyming syllable, although also this is more a (strong) tendency than a rule. It seems logical to assume that this kind of metrics is more suitable for stress-based languages like Germanic than other types, such as the syllable-based rhythm we discussed above. Interestingly, we can detect a stress-based rhythm in all of Hettinga's poems as well, as is illustrated here for the poems we have discussed before:

- (13) ***Moarn** sal it foar ivich **maitiid** wêzen, mar **nacht** is it **no** (5)  
De **moanne** – de **siel** fan **immen** dy't **stjert** in it **tsjuster** (5)  
Is **fol**, en **dronken** as de **paden** tusken de **doarpen oer** (5)  
**Swarte** piramiden fan **pleatsen**, **fingerwizingen**. (5)*

- (14) *It is **slim simmer**. (2)*

*En de **sinne winkt** dizze **middei** mei it **ljocht** dat earst (4)  
Op de **griene harpen** fan 'e heuvels syn **grûntoan fynt**. (4)  
**Hossebossend rydt** it de **gapjende weinspoaren** del (4)  
Nei de **griene hypotenusas** fan 't **nôt** dat **rusket**. (4)  
As, **fierwei**, de **twatalige brêge** oer de **Severn** (4)  
Of, **no**, de **Devilsbridge** oer de **Towry**, dy't mei **koele** (4)  
**Fingers** myn **nâtbrune boerefaam** har **boarsten** opnimt, (4)  
Wylst tusken **krásbeien ferburgen eagen strune** nei (4)  
De **stream** dy't **ûnspringt** op 'e **hichten** fan 'e **ikebeam**. (4)  
**Triljen tilt** it **hoarnfee**. (4)*

Stresses are distributed very unevenly over the string of syllables, but there always seems to be a fixed number of them. The poems thus have a rhythmical structure that can be counted in terms of stressed syllables only.

Hettinga's poems, in other words, seem to have a *dual* structure: there is a fixed number of syllables in every line, and there is also a fixed number of stresses in every line, but the two levels of organization seem unrelated to each other.

I know of only one poet for which something similar has been proposed: Dylan Thomas (Kiparsky 2010, Fabb and Halle 2012) who at least in some of his poetry (like *Fern Hill*, which was actually translated by Hettinga) seems to have used a similar dual pattern. One difference is that Thomas' lines are rarely as long as those

of Hettinga; another is that Thomas brought much more variation in the length of his lines. None of this takes away, however, from the fact that the similarity is striking. The following, for instance, is the scansion of the first two stanza's given by Kiparsky (2010) (the first number denotes the number of syllables, the second the number of stresses in the line):

- (15) *It was my thirtieth year to heaven*(9/4)  
*Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood* (12/5)  
*And the mussel pooled and the heron* (9/4)  
*Priested shore* (3/1)  
*The morning beckon*(5/2)  
*With water praying and call of seagull and rook*(12/5)  
*And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall* (12/5)  
*Myself to set foot* (5/2)  
*That second* (3/1)  
*In the still sleeping town and set forth.* (9/4)
- My birthday began with the water*-(9/4)  
*Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name* (12/5)  
*Above the farms and the white horses* (9/4)  
*And I rose* (3/1)  
*In rainy autumn*(5/2)  
*And walked abroad in shower of all my days* (12/5)  
*High tide and the heron dived when I took the road* (12/5)  
*Over the border* (5/2)  
*And the gates* (3/1)  
*Of the town closed as the town awoke.* (9/4)

It is not entirely implausible that Hettinga borrowed this pattern from Thomas, although I have not find any explicit evidence for this. As I mentioned, he did translate *Fern Hill*; and furthermore *De blauwe hawk van Wales* ('The Blue Hawk of Wales') of which (7) is the first stanza, refers to Thomas. Also from interviews, we know that the Frisian poet admired his Welsh colleague. It is also sometimes claimed that Thomas' himself developed the pattern from his knowledge of Welsh syllable-counting poetry, or from the so-called 'sprung rhythm' of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hettinga may have been familiar with all of these as well, so that at least in principle an independent development cannot be excluded.

However this may be, the dual patterning remains rather surprising. Within Fabb and Halle's (2012) analysis, it requires two separate dimensions of scansion of the line – and I have found no other examples of a poetic form where this is necessary. Also Kiparsky (2010) points to the rather strange nature of Thomas' 'dimetre'. It seems that the two scholarly proposals for an analysis of Thomas' work have been developed independently, but they are relatively recent; both of them were proposed only a few years before Hettinga's death, and at a moment when he had already written almost all of his work within this particular form. If his metre is

indeed a conscious imitation of Thomas, he has discovered this style already several decades before some of the world's most renowned linguists.

#### 4. Performance

What could be the reason behind this dual metrics? One hypothesis we may consider is that they serve two different functions of Hettinga's poetry. The syllable count seems a hidden organizing principle that is at best 'seen' on the written page. It is unlikely that any listener would ever detect it when Hettinga was performing his poems: the lines are too long, and the difference between odd and even-numbered lines too subtle. In the performances I have access to, Hettinga is rather precise on the syllable count, but not completely: there is variation between reduced and unreduced syllables, for instance, so that *It is slim simmer* (5 syllables) can also sound as *'t Is slim simmer* (4 syllables).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Hettinga also seemed to take quite some freedom in his performance of the stresses in every line. Furthermore, also the pauses which Hettinga takes do not always exactly conform to the written line breaks. Here is a transcription of the first stanza of *De blauwe hauk fan Wales* as it can be found on YouTube (I put in boldface those syllables that Hettinga gives extra emphasis):

(16) 't is **slim simmer**.

*En de sinne winkt dizze middei mei it ljocht dat earst op de griene harpen fan  
'e heuvels syn grûntoan*

**fynt**.

*Hossebossend rydt it de gapjende weinspoaren del*

*Nei de griene hypotenusas fan 't nôt dat rustket.*

*As, fierwei, de twatalige brêge oer de Severn*

*Of, no, de Devilsbridge oer de Towy,*

*dy't mei koele fingers myn nôtbrune boerefaam har boarsten opnimt,*

*Wylst tusken krúsbeien ferburgen eagen strune*

*nei de stream dy't ûnspringt op 'e hichten fan 'e ikebeam.*

*Triljen tilt it hoarnfee.*

There is very little regularity in line-length, either from the point of view of syllables, or that of stresses. Some of the lines, when defined by pauses, are even longer than they already are at the written page: in particular the second spoken line takes almost all of two written lines. At the same time, the lines do not correspond to syntactic constituency either; for instance the verb *fynt* from an embedded clause forms a line on its own and is therefore excluded from the rest of the embedded clause and the main clause that embeds it which are all together on the preceding line.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Fabb (p.c.) points out that it is possible that the dual pattern had a similar function also for Dylan Thomas: syllables were there for the written page and stresses for oral performance. It is clear that Thomas also wrote visual poetry at times.

In a study of Dylan Thomas' performances, Fabb (2013) has pointed out that one underlying principle under these seems to be to enhance variability: lines are made longer and shorter to create maximal tension. Something like this might be going on in Hettinga's performance as well. It is interesting that only three lines in the middle are performed in a way that is faithful to the regular written form – they are more or less 'at rest'. But this block is preceded and followed by fragments of wildly varying length. Next to a tendency for variation, one may see in this also some iconicity: the stanza describes a trip in a car on a track, amidst a rather baroque landscape.

## 5. Conclusion

There thus seem to be at least three independent dimensions of poetic organization of the text in Hettinga's poems: a syllable count, a stress count and an organization of the performance that seems rather built on principles of variation and iconicity. All of these organizational levels are clear and precise; the poet must have been aware about them. Together they account for at least some of the 'musical' impression that his poems make.

Still many aspects need to be investigated forever. One can wonder, for instance, whether stresses are really randomly distributed over the lines, or there is more organization to this aspect as well. Also, the division in (16) is rather impressionistic and actually conflates several aspects of Hettinga's performance, like lengthening, inserting (micro)pauses, and pitch raising. It could be worthwhile to distinguish these levels further to get to a better view of how these performances worked.

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### **Editions**

The Frisian lines are taken from

Tsjêbbe Hettinga, 2017, *Het vaderpaard / It faderpaard. Alle gedichten* [collected poems in a bilingual Frisian/Dutch edition]. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

(3) p. 314

(6) p. 320

(7) p. 310

The English translations by James Brockway are taken from

Tsjêbbe Hettinga, 1999, *Strange shores / Frjemde kusten*. [Ljouwert]: Frysk en Frij.

(3) p. 47

(6) p. 51

(7) p. 37