Metrical myths

METRICAL MYTHS

AN EXPERIMENTAL-PHONETIC INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRODUCTION AND PERCEPTION OF METRICAL SPEECH

Dr. M.E. Loots

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Introduction

This book is a report on a series of experiments carried out within the framework of experimental phonetics. Experimental phonetics aims at testing hypotheses concerning the processes of producing and perceiving human speech sounds. This particular investigation focused on the production and perception of metrical speech, a subject which is usually considered more suitable for introspection than for experimental research.

Although metre is said to consist of abstract patterns, the terms used in the description of these patterns suggest that their characteristics can be expressed in measurable parameters. The most telling example is that of calling some syllables 'long' and other syllables 'short', or even 'half as long'. Experimental data obtained as early as the beginning of this century showed that metrical patterns do not exist of simple alternations of long and short syllables. Still, the belief that the differentiation between syllables can be expressed in terms such as long-short or loud-soft persists. This may be the result of incorrectly applying the results of experiments on rhythm to speech.

In the case of recognizing or experiencing a particular type of rhythm, usually tested by means of tone sequences, it is possible to have subjects perceive one particular rhythm by varying one characteristic of the tones. In speech, however, the matter is more complicated because of factors such as grammar and meaning. Within the field of linguistics the perception of a metrical pattern is said to arise from abstract rather than concrete parameters. Because a speaker knows the stress patterns of his language, he will also recognize its metrical patterns. Thus, two extreme approaches to metrical theory can be distinguished: the one maintains that metre can be described in measurable, concrete parameters, the other suggests that metre is part of the abstract rule system of a given language.

The present investigation focused on two main issues without accepting either extreme view. The first topic concerned the

acoustic reality of foot boundaries. Although it is generally accepted that the existence of silent intervals between feet should be regarded as a fallacy, a likely alternative has not been agreed upon as yet. In a number of experiments the relevance of acoustic demarcation of feet was investigated.

The second issue concerned metrical prominence. In a comparison of prose and poetry the hypothesis was tested that in metrical poetry more syllables are given emphasis by the speaker than in prose.

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