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Eva Lilja

University of Gothenburg

ORCID: 0009-0001-2953-3578

Free Verse – Theory and Method. An Example in Cognitive Versification Studies

Introduction

I will dwell on cognitive versification studies and the versification of free verse in Germanic languages. Different languages relate differently to free verse. The germanic metred verse may be rather stiff and bumpy, and it was felt as a liberation for the poets of a century ago to get rid of the metre.

I work within the framework of cognitive versification studies. This school of metrics has three pioneers. Reuven Tsur was the forerunner. His cognitive approach can be adapted both to metered and modernistic poetry. His books on cognitive poetics, especially *Poetic Rhythm*[1], are the basis of cognitive versification studies. By drawing upon findings from neurology combined with those from phonology, he demonstrates the continued significance of Gestalt psychology – even today. The gestalt is a basic tool for free verse and old measured forms.

In addition to Tsur, I lean on two other pioneers of cognitive versification studies. Derek Attridge investigated medieval verse rhythms that turn out to be rather uneven. These old forms are the very origins of free verse. In his later work, Attridge investigates cognitive devices like movement in poetry[2]. In choosing his title, *Moving Words*, Attridge was inspired by Richard Cureton's theory of four temporalities in verse rhythm. Cureton also stresses a rhythmical motion in time[3]. He distinguishes four levels of rhythm: pulse, grouping, pro-

[1] R. Tsur, *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance: An Empirical Study in Cognitive Poetics*, 2nd edition, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton 2012a.

[2] D. Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

[3] R. Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, Longman, London 1992.

longation and thematic. These levels form a hierarchy in which the pulse is the smallest entity of one foot, the grouped phrase comes next, and the prolongation covers at least one line.

The History of Free Verse

Germanic free verse was created four times from four different points of departure, creating four different types of versification[4]. In addition, we have the French tradition, which is a mighty influencer out of another accent system. The first Germanic free verse was written in the middle of the eighteenth century by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803). He intended to imitate antique poetic rhythms, especially the forms of Aeolic poetry – for example, Sappho – and its Latin copies. The typical devices are short lines, enjambments, and an affluence of spondees.

In the early nineteenth century, free verse was reinvented for the second time by Heinrich Heine (1797–1856). Heine's free verse developed from the four-beat line – the popular old German form found in folk songs and medieval chronicles. This form has its roots in the Edda songs of Old Norse poetry. This kind of free verse prioritises lines of about ten syllables ending with a full stop, mainly with two phrases per line. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) recreated free verse for the third time around the middle of the nineteenth century. Influenced by the Bible, he set out to imitate the Book of Psalms, with his verse form being characterised by long lines and parallelisms[5]. Repeated intonation curves give it a special phrasing.

As can be seen, free versification has grown out of the most prestigious historical patterns possible – Greek poetry, the Bible, and the Edda songs. I add the experiments with avant-garde forms to the list, starting with the Dada group in 1916 and prospering first in the 1960s and later around the end of the last millennium. In the history of rhythms, the avant-garde has made important innovations[6].

Pioneering modernists did not want their verses to alternate. They were looking for other kinds of rhythm that slipped out of traditional seriality. When some of today's metrists force free verse into a kind of alternation, they go against the aesthetic will of modernist poets who looked for kinds of rhythm other than alternation.

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[4] E. Lilja, *Svensk Metrik* [Swedish Metrics], The Swedish Academy: Norstedts, Stockholm 2006, p. 268.

[5] G.W. Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*, New York University Press, New York 1975, p. 215; S. Bradley, *The Fundamental Metrical Principle of Whitman's Poetry*, „American Literature" 1939, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 448.

[6] M. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1999.

Rhythmical Principles

I distinguish three different rhythmical principles, following Richard Cureton's division into three so-called temporalities in poetry[7]. According to Cureton, I classify aesthetic rhythm following the three principles: serial, sequential, and dynamic rhythm, which are three basic sets of gestalt qualities[8].

- Serial rhythm: The tactus or beat in measured music and poetry. A palefence is also serial like the colonnades of an antique temple.
- Sequential rhythm: The sequence of a phrase, which is to be found in free verse and in Old Greek poetry, in the half line of the four-beat medieval line, in music and in the surface of a painting, as well as in the parts of a sculpture or a piece of architecture.
- Dynamic rhythm: The forces and directions in two- and three-dimensional artefacts, and the temporal intensification towards a focus in music and poetry; that is, the semantic rhythm.

There are differences in extent between these three kinds of rhythm. One tactus in music or poetry covers about half a second. This period signifies the iamb, a widespread kind of tactus and a walking step. A sequence takes a few seconds and covers a phrase or a verse line. However, temporal art forms also work with dynamic rhythm. In a poem, it could be about prolongations, semantic tension between main points, and, in music, intensification towards a focus[9].

A piece of art mostly uses all these types of rhythm to varying degrees, or at least two of them. However, painting, sculpture and architecture begin with dynamic rhythms, while temporal art forms, like poetry and music, proceed from sequences and seriality[10]. Dynamic rhythm has its base in the whole form, while sequential and serial rhythms begin with a short segment. The three kinds of rhythm merge in most pieces of art, even if one type prevails.

Older prosodies were initially focused upon seriality, partly because this was the common verse principle before modernism and partly due to the fascinating qualities of the metre. Seriality can hypnotise readers – anybody could lose their mind in the flow of regular beats. For shamans, seriality has been a method of getting closer to God, and for my generation, Elvis Presley's music had the same effect.

Looking back at verse history, it can be seen that seriality has been the rhythmic principle of measured poetical forms from the Renaissance to Romanticism. However, serial rows would hardly be enjoyable without embracing a rhythmic sequence. The rhythmic principle of Germanic medieval accentual versification,

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[7] R. Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse…*, op. cit., pp. 126–153.

[8] L. Hopsch, E. Lilja, *Principles of Rhythm: Temporal and Spatial Aspects*, in: *Changing Borders: Contemporary Positions in Intermediality*, ed. J. Arvidson, Intermedia Studies Press, Lund 2007, p. 364.

[9] O. Kühl, *Musical Semantics*, Peter Lang, Bern 2007.

[10] L. Elleström, *The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Media Relations*, in: *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2010, p 19.

as well as of modernist free verse, is sequential. When shaping poetry, medieval and modernist poets use structured sequences in combination with powerful segmentation.

Time Intervals and Embodiment

The human body is rhythmic. One only needs to think of heartbeats, breathing and, not least, walking. From this perspective, the experience of rhythm seems to emanate from the reality of the body. Aesthetic rhythms, in the first step, seem to be formed based on human biorhythms such as walking, dancing, pulse, and breathing[11]. In the next step, they meet with traditions and cultural experiences[12].

The biorhythms that underlie aesthetic rhythms affect sensory impulses of versification, as seen in the following examples. Motor schemas occur at the levels of line and phrase. The seriality of a poem might be based on the human experience of heartbeat or walking steps, and sequences of free verse might be formed out of motor schemas like leaping and running – or resting. The human body does look like a system of larger and smaller rhythms. Hormones and neurons all dance in rhythmical patterns. The following rhythms are more than likely involved in aesthetic rhythms:

— The *echoic brain memory* with an interval of about half a second is most evidently recognised in cadenced poetry – the interval between prominences mostly lasts about half a second. It is a serial rhythm that is to be found, for example, in the pattern of iambic pentameter. The walking body practises the serial rhythm when taking one step after another. The pulse also seems to have something to do with the serial rhythm of metered versification.
— The three (two to five, precisely) seconds of *short-term memory* cover approximately a usual line length and a single breath. The sequential rhythm dominates modern free verse and the medieval four-beat line. The three-second interval of a common verse line and the short-term memory coincide, approximately, with a breath interval.
— *Long-term memory* operates in an amount of time more than three seconds. In the poem, it offers rhythmic patterns out of, among other things, sensorimotor experiences – like walking, with its many possibilities. Dynamic rhythm needs more time than an iamb or a line.

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[11] L. Hopsch, E. Lilja, *Embodied Rhythm in Space and Time: A Poem and a Sculpture*, „Style" 2017, vol. 51 no. 4, p. 437. This article develops the relation between embodiment and verse more in detail.

[12] F.J. Varela, E. Thompson, E. Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1993, p. 172; G. Sonesson, *From the Signification of Embodiment to the Embodiment of Signification: A Study in Phenomenological Semiotics*, in: *Body, Language and Mind,* vol. 1: *Embodiment*, ed. T. Ziemke, De Gruyter, Berlin 2007, pp. 110–111.

These three time levels of embodiment – half a second, about three seconds, and more than three seconds – coincide with the three principles of rhythm – serial, sequential and dynamic. The period of about half a second returns to the serial principle of rhythm. The (approximately) three-second level is important for sequential rhythm. Concerning long-term memory, the dynamic rhythm of meaning construction needs more than three seconds[13].

Fredrick Turner and Ernst Pöppel[14] discovered that the short-term memory span of three seconds coincides with the span of common Germanic verse lines. It is also a universal interval in poetry from different cultures. The extension of the short-term memory seems to determine the length of a normal verse line – 10 to 11 syllables – worldwide[15]. Regarding Europe, the *hendekasillaba* (or eleven syllables) has dominated in verse development. Most classical metres were established in the Romance countries during the late Middle Ages. They were mostly founded upon the line of eleven syllables. Later, the Germanic cultures developed iambic pentameter out of the *hendekasillaba*, combined with the domestic rhythms of the four-beat line. Notably, a pentameter mostly realises only four of five possible stresses[16].

Pöppel's discovery explains the most typical device of poetry – the division into short lines. What is possible to keep in mind is simultaneously surrounded by the limits of line breaks – short pauses of about half a second. This device pictures poetry as a string of expressive moments, unlike prose, which is continuous. Pöppel's results presuppose a kind of digital reading of poetry – the reader keeps all meaning of the line in mind simultaneously, and with the line break, this bit of meaning is pushed into the long-term memory, and the reader prepares for a new one. Prose, however, works analogically by continuously spreading out signification. Such digital reading might explain some of the magic of poetry.

The poet plays with all these time limits. Of course, there are verse lines of all sizes, from one syllable to several lines. However, a line shorter than normal (of about ten syllables) is felt to be a short line, and one that exceeds that size seems long, for example, the French alexandrine.

The half-second interval – the iamb – is related to pulse and heartbeats. Cadenced poetry from earlier times mostly used serial rhythm, i.e., rhythms connected with regular biorhythms. A lingering reading of cadenced poetry will

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[13] O. Kühl, *Improvisation og tanke* [Improvisation and Thought], Basilisk, København 2003.

[14] F. Turner, E. Pöppel, *The Neural Lyre: Poetic Meter, the Brain, and Time*, in: *Poetry*, Poetry Foundation, Chicago, IL 1983. To be noticed, perhaps, that Turner did not like free verse.

[15] Ibidem; E. Pöppel, *Lost in Time: A Historical Frame, Elementary Processing Units and the 3-Second Window*, „Acta Neurobiologiae Experimentalis" 2004, vol. 64, no. 3; C. Trevarthen, *Human Biochronology: On the Source and Functions of „Musicality"*, in: *Music that Works: Contributions of Biology, Neurophysiology, Psychology, Sociology, Medicine and Musicology*, eds. R. Haas, V. Brandes, Springer, Wien 2009.

[16] R. Tsur, *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance…*, op. cit.

make about one stress every half a second, which is the same interval that is used for hypnosis[17]. This interval comes close to the pulse as well as a step, and the echoic memory.

Ferlinghetti's Woodlark

Below, I show how free rhythms work in a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919–2021) [18], the last poem in his famous collection, *A Coney Island of the Mind*[19]. Ferlinghetti was one of the Beat Poets in the famous Californian 1950s. He was also a painter, social activist, and co-founder of City Lights Booksellers & Publishers. This second collection of poems is looked upon as Ferlinghetti's best one. Here, he developed themes of anarchy, engagement, and a belief in the wonder of life. Its basic motive is getting down to reality and making of it what we can. Ferlinghetti's poem is avant-garde regarding its shape in print. In his temporal sequences, he mixes antique colon rhythms with serial strains.

Rhythm may signify in two ways. In the first case, stress shows what is essential in a text. What is stressed is emphasised[20]. In the second case, rhythm may become an icon of something, for example, a bouncing train, but more often, something more subtle. The structure of feelings conforms with the rhythm structure, where both joy and fury use ups and downs to express themselves, while depression and tenderness need flat curves[21]. Embodiment is a special case of iconicity.

What happens in this poem (below)? Line group 1–6 claims the woodlark to be the first among singers, and contrast it to „wild beasts". Line group 7–13 mentions two beasts, Hölderlin and Rimbaud, perhaps the most elevated of all poets. Here, they are declared beasts because they are said to be mad. Line group 14–19 describes the most common theory of language, the idea of a simple relationship between language and the visible world – the mirror theory or, maybe, naïve realism. Line group 20–23 brings the problem to a conclusion by rudely rejecting this relationship, and emphasising that it is possible to see anything – if you are intoxicated (or mad) enough.

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[17] E.D. Snyder, *Hypnotic Poetry: A Study of Trance-inducing Technique in Certain Poems and its Literary Significance*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1930; R. Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*: *Space, Rhythm, and Semantic Structure in Religious Poetry and its Mystic-secular Counterpart*: *A Study in Cognitive Poetics*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2003.

[18] On the following page: Facsimile of a Ferlinghetti poem, L. Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, New Directions, New York 1958.

[19] L. Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island…*, op. cit.

[20] Y. Tynyanov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, Ardis, Ann Arbor, MI (1924) 1981.

[21] R. Tsur, *Playing by Ear and the Tip of the Tongue: Precategorial information in poetry*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 2012b.

I describe the poem's rhythm with the help of some analytic categories: the rhythmic principle, the cognitive schema like direction or balance, and some salient rhythmic figures. First of all, we must have a notation scheme that tells us where to find the stresses. The notation below shows the speech rhythm. After that, we have to decide which principle of rhythm is at stake in the line, serial or sequential. The next category builds up the cognitive schema of the line; it is about direction – whether the sequence is rising or falling or maybe resting in balance[22]. In the last column, I have noted some interesting rhythmic figures.

1 O o O ooo OO	serial rhythm	direction	trochees
2 oO oo OOO	sequential	direction	molossus
3 o OOO o >	sequential	balance	molossus
4 OO	sequential	balance	spondée
5 O oo O	sequential	balance	choriamb
6 oo Oo Oo	serial	direction	trochees
…			
7 O oo	sequential	direction	dactylus
8 oo OOo	sequential	balance	bacchius
9 O o OOO oo O	sequential	balance	molossus
10 o Ooo	sequential	balance	second paeon
11 oO oO	serial	direction	iambs
12 o OO o O o	serial	balance	bachius
13 o O ooo O o	serial	balance	tribrach
…			
14 oo O o OOO o	sequential	balance	anapaest [molossus
15 o O o O ooo O	serial	direction	iambs
16 o O o O o O o >	serial	direction	iambs
17 O o O o O >	serial	balance	trochees
18 O ooo O oo	serial	direction	trochees
19 O o O	sequential	balance	cretic
…			
20 O oo O	sequential	balance	choriamb
21 oo OO	sequential	direction	Ionic
22 oO oO oO >	serial	direction	iambs
23 o O o	serial	balance	amphibrach

[22] M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Signification, Imagination and Reason*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1987.

13

sweet and various the woodlark

who sings at the unbought gate

and yet how many

wild beasts

how many mad

in the civil thickets

Hölderlin

in his stone tower

or in that kind carpenter's house

at Tübingen

or then Rimbaud

his 'nightmare and logic'

a sophism of madness

But we have our own more recent

who also fatally assumed

that some direct connection

does exist between

language and reality

word and world

which is a laugh

if you ask me

I too have drunk and seen

the spider

The very first line is directed forward to the heavy „woodlark" at the end of the line. It is also slightly serial – if you give some extra weight to „-ous" in „various", thus shaping some trochees. Line 3, „and yet how many" oOOOo rests with its heavy molossus; it is sequential and should not be alternating.

The tempo changes between different parts of the poem. The second line group, which deals with Hölderlin and Rimbaud, starts at a slow tempo with a sequential rhythm. The comments on Hölderlin include one slow spondee in l. 8, and the following line, l. 9, carries a heavy molossus. When talking about Rimbaud, the rhythm – quicker and quicker – changes to the serial principle, reaching a full stop after l. 13.

The sequential free-verse rhythm dominates the first half of the poem. However, the serial rhythm gradually becomes dominant in the second half. The poem's style changes from the rather high-brow language of cultural tradition in the beginning to common speech in the second half. The last line group, l. 20–23, pictures the same curve. After the slow expressive ionic „if you ask me" oo OO of l. 21, the regular iambic tetrameter follows in the last two lines, which sharply concludes the poem.

This poem is spread over paper more loosely than it was customary in 1958[23]. Both margins are loosely waving in a way that differs very much from metered stanzas but also from early free versification with its typical picture – a straight left margin and a slightly wavering right margin. The blanks between the lines differ in extensiveness and shape dynamic tensions. Lines 3–11 make a loftier impression than the rest of the text, but the line group 12–19 is tighter and more concentrated. This poem's second part elaborates on language theory in an informal spoken language. Here, the printed picture becomes tighter than before. The picture differs also in broadness. It is relatively slim at the beginning, but, especially, the tight part of the third line group gets thicker.

Regarding visual iconicity, this poem might be compared with a fat-bellied fellow standing – not too steady – on his right foot, maybe underlining the poem's last two lines. The printed picture is unstable. It has two swings to the right and one to the left, as seen in the diagram's arrows. One dynamic FORCE hits the picture up to the right, another in the middle of the left, and a third one down to the right[24]. You may also follow the red line upwards that pictures the woodlark rising from the ground to take its place as the most elevated singer.

[23] Facsimile of a Ferlinghetti poem with directions inserted by Lena Hopsch (2010), L. Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*..., op. cit.

[24] M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*..., op. cit.

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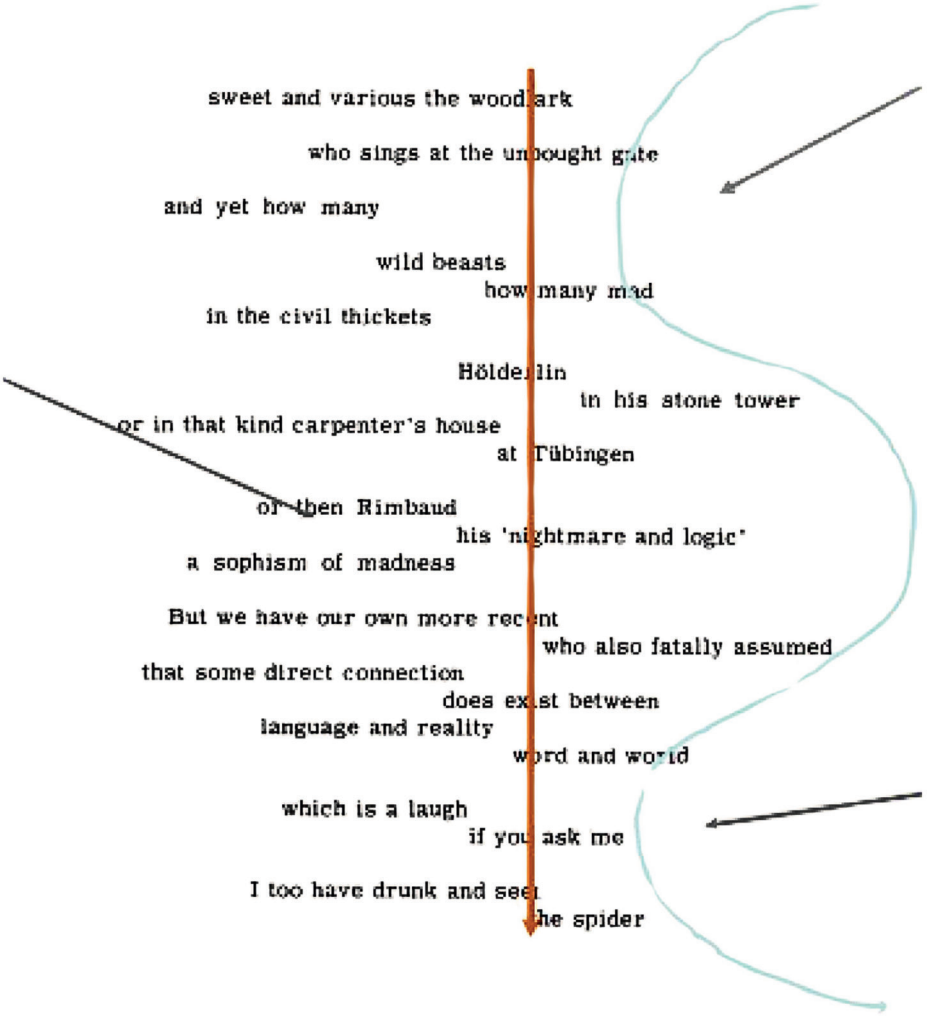
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or in that kind carpenter's house
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or then Rimbaud
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But we have our own more recent
who also fatally assumed
that some direct connection
does exist between
language and reality
word and world
which is a laugh
if you ask me
I too have drunk and seen
the spider

Rhythm is Experience

Poetic rhythm takes place in perception. The poem's acoustic and visual devices transform into a rhythm when perceived by the reader. Rhythm schemas are perceptual entities triggered by versification, in line and phrase, like repetitions, caesuras, tactus, prolongations, and so on – salient gestalts at all levels. Rhythm is formed in a process where reading adjusts the sounds of a poem.

The experience of rhythm is decided by a tension between cognitive factors and cultural conventions. The cognitive elements are experiences of balance, direction, force and movement. The cultural elements are historically developed verse patterns – such as those created by Sappho, Snorri Sturluson, Petrarch, Mallarmé and others. Aesthetic rhythm arises when formal elements of versification activate perceptual schemas.

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Abstract

A tension between cognitive factors and cultural conventions constitutes poetic rhythm. Rhythm is formed when reading adjusts the sounds of a poem, and versification means repetitions, caesuras, tactus, prolongations, and so on. This paper presents some prerequisites for investigating free verse using the theory of cognitive versification. Free verse has emerged from the most prestigious historical patterns possible – Greek poetry, the Bible, and the Edda songs. Aesthetic rhythm can be classified according to three principles: serial, sequential, and dynamic rhythm, which are the three basic sets of gestalt qualities. Poetic rhythm uses three time levels that coincide with body rhythms – half a second (a tactus, the pulse), about three seconds (a line, short-term memory), and more than three seconds (semantic coherence, long-term memory). Lineation covers the short-term memory interval and promotes a digital reading that simultaneously keeps one line's overall meaning in mind. It might explain some of the poetry's magic. We demonstrate how free rhythms work in a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Wiersz wolny – teoria i metoda. Przykład w kognitywnych badaniach wersyfikacji

Streszczenie:

Rytm poetycki jest ustalany przez napięcie między czynnikami poznawczymi a konwencjami kulturowymi. Rytm powstaje w procesie, w którym czytanie dostosowuje dźwięki wiersza, wersyfikacja oznacza powtórzenia, cezury, tactus, przedłużenia itd. Tutaj przedstawiono niektóre przesłanki do badania wolnego wiersza przy użyciu teorii badań wersyfikacji kognitywnej. Wolny wiersz wyrósł z najbardziej prestiżowych możliwych wzorców historycznych – poezji greckiej, Biblii i pieśni Eddy. Rytm estetyczny można sklasyfikować według trzech zasad: rytmu seryjnego, rytmu sekwencyjnego i rytmu dynamicznego, któ-re są trzema podstawowymi zestawami cech gestalt. Rytm poetycki wykorzystuje trzy poziomy czasu, które pokrywają się z niektórymi rytmami ciała – pół sekundy (tactus, puls), około trzech sekund (linia, pamięć krótkotrwała) i ponad trzy sekundy (spójność seman-tyczna, pamięć długotrwała). Lineacja obejmuje przedział pamięci krótkotrwałej i promu-je czytanie cyfrowe, które jednocześnie zachowuje w pamięci całe znaczenie jednego wier-sza. To może wyjaśniać część magii poezji. Pokazano również, jak działają wolne rytmy w wierszu Lawrence'a Ferlinghettiego.

Keywords: cognitive versification studies, aesthetic rhythm, free verse, principles of rhythm, Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Słowa kluczowe: studia kognitywistyczne nad wersyfikacją, rytm estetyczny, wiersz wolny, zasady rytmu, Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Eva Lilja – Professor Emerita of Literature in the Department of Literature, History of Ide-as, and Religion at the University of Göteborg, Sweden. Specialising in modernist poetry, poetic rhythm, and embodiment in poetry, she pioneered the study of free versification and was the founder and chair of the Nordic Society for Metrical Studies (1998–2006). Lil-ja's pioneered the study of free versification since her doctoral thesis in 1981 and was the founder and chair for the Nordic Society for Metrical Studies (1995–2009). She was also a Swedish Academy Researcher for writing the official Swedish handbook in metrics (1998–2006). Her latest book, *Rhythm in Modern Poetry. An Essay in Cognitive Versification Studies*, is a pioneering work in cognitive versification studies, scrutinising the rhythmical means of free verse (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).