

**History of English I**  
**Krista Vogelberg**  
**Part 3**

Old English poetic rules

'Fyrst 'forth gewat  
'Bat under 'beorge.

On 'stefn 'stigon.

'sund with 'sande.

On 'bearm 'nacan

'Guth-searo ge'atolic.

'Weras on 'wilsith

Ge'wat tha ofer 'waeg-holm 'winde ge'fysed

'Flota 'fami-heals

'flota waes on 'ythum

'Beornas ge'arwe

'Streamas 'wundon,

'Secgas 'baeron

'beorhte 'fraetwe,

'Guman 'ut scufon,

'wudu 'bundenne.

'winde ge'fysed

'fugle 'gelicost.

# English is a **stress-rhythm** language

In speaking English, we place stresses at equal time intervals, or, in other words, the stresses are **evenly spaced**. When there are more unstressed syllables, we pronounce them faster, when there are fewer unstressed syllables, we pronounce them slower – the important thing is that the interval between two stressed syllables should be equal.

French, for instance, is a length-rhythm language: almost all syllables of equal length.

Thus, English speech as occurring in real time can be described as follows (capital X – a stressed syllable, small x, an unstressed syllable):

**xXxxxxXx Xxxx Xxx X**

as against French

**XxxXxxxxXxX**

The stress-rhythm nature of the English language goes back to Old English times. Ilse Lehiste: indigenous poetry is closely linked to the phonetic nature of the language.

# Old English/Anglo-Saxon poetic metre

In Old English poetry the number of **syllables per line was not important** (just the opposite of French, e.g. Alexandrine – 12 syllables per line, the number of stresses not important). What counted was the number of **stresses**.

**Four stresses per line, the stresses evenly spaced** (e.g. occur at equal time intervals)

A **pause** (in Latin called caesura) in the middle of the line. **Two stresses** before the pause, **two stresses** after the pause. **The number of unstressed syllables between the stressed syllables is not significant, varies.**



Unlike, e.g., in Estonian folk poetry, **the stresses fall on notional words.**

´Fyrst ´forth gewat

´flota waes on ´ythum

´bat under ´beorge

´beornas ´gearwe

# The old meter has actually survived!

Although Chaucer brought continental meters to Britain, the English language still shines through English poetry.

Cf Shakespeare's "Hamlet"

**To be or not to be, that is the question**

Officially iambic pentameter, i.e.,

**To 'be or 'not to 'be that 'is the 'question**

actually only four stresses:

**To 'be or 'not to be, 'that is the 'question**

The same applies to Chaucer himself:

‘Whan that A´prille with his ´shoures ´soote

(Although “should” be

Whan ´that A´prille ´with his ´shoures ´soote –  
iambic pentameter)

The tension between the formal meter (i.e. iambic pentameter) and the “real” one (i.e. the one that sounds natural and that all actors actually use) creates a specific poetic effect.

# Alliteration

Old English poetry: initial rhymes (important for remembering! After all, the poetry was mainly oral, only selected poems written down by clerks at the command of noblemen/kings).

Alliteration – consonants at the beginning of words are repeated.

**Alliteration applied to stressed syllables.**

**Alliteration bound together the two halves of the line.**

**Therefore, the third stressed syllable (first in the second half) had to alliterate with at least one stressed syllable in the first half of the line.**

´Fyrst ´forth gewat   ´**flota** waes on ´ythum

Ideally, all four stressed syllables ought to have alliterated, but this was seldom feasible.

The best example in our texts:

Ge´wat ofer ´way-holm, ´winde ge´fysed  
(if we believe that /w/ and /f/ are relatively close as sounds).

Since every second half line was paraphrased (not repeated exactly, but the same scene often viewed from a different perspective) by the contents of the first half of the next line, remembering was ensured with the help of both sense and sound.



Alliteration demanded numerous synonyms: hence Old English had 20-30 synonyms for words that were important in the poetry of that time (battle, sea, ship, man/warrior), see p. 37 of Introduction