Iambs and Trochees, Symmetries and Asymmetries

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A long-standing observation about the typology of binary stress systems is that patterns that appear to be based on trochaic feet are attested in a greater variety than patterns that appear to be based on iambic feet (Kager 1993, Hayes 1995, van de Vijver 1998, Hyde 2002, Alber 2005, among others). While this typological imbalance is typically discussed in terms of parsing directionality – directional parsing patterns found among trochaic systems are very often absent among iambic systems – I argue that we can gain a better understanding of the disparity by considering the patterns of attestation in mirror image pairs.

To illustrate what I mean by mirror image pairs, the pattern in (1a) is most consistent with trochaic footing. It stresses every odd-numbered syllable counting from the left. Its mirror image in (1b) is most consistent with iambic footing. It stresses every odd-numbered syllable counting from the right. The (1a) pattern can be found in Maranungku (Tryon 1970) and the (1b) pattern in Suruwaha (Everett 1996).

(1)   a.   óσóσóσ   b.   σóσóσó
            óσóσóσó   óσóσóσó

Similarly, the (2a) pattern is most consistent with trochaic footing, and its mirror image (2b) most consistent with iambic footing. In (2b), stress appears on every odd-numbered syllable from the left except the final syllable. In (2b), stress appears on every odd-numbered syllable from the right except the initial syllable. The trochaic (2a) pattern can be found in Pintupi (Hansen & Hansen 1969), but, this time, the iambic mirror image, (2b), is unattested.

(2)   a.   óσóσóσ   b.   σóσóσó
            óσóσóσσ   σσóσóσó

There are two advantages to considering patterns of attestation in terms of mirror image pairs like those in (1,2). The first is that it allows for a theory-neutral examination of iambic-trochaic asymmetries. There is no commitment to any particular view of prosodic or metrical structure. The second is that it allows generalizations to emerge that might not otherwise. In this talk, I focus on the following three:

(3)   a.   In mirror image patterns with neither clash nor lapse, both members of the pair are attested.

       b.   In mirror image patterns with either clash or lapse, at most one member of the pair is attested.

       c.   Attested patterns with clash or lapse always have stress on the initial syllable, always leave the final syllable stressless, or both.

While there is no reason to doubt the generalization in (3a), there are a limited number of potential counterexamples to the generalizations in (3b,c). I examine the implications of these potential counterexamples both for the generalizations themselves and for the various Optimality Theoretic approaches to metrical stress theory.