

Hiatus and the metrical hierarchy in Old Japanese poetry

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Old Japanese syllable structure is highly constrained: the only licit syllable shapes are CV and V – there are no codas and no weight distinctions, unlike Middle and Modern Japanese. Onsetless (V-type) syllables are further constrained in distribution, and occur almost exclusively in word-initial position. Where morphological processes would lead to a (prosodic) word-internal vowel cluster, the hiatus is reduced through elision of one of the vowels, or reduction of the VV-sequence into a single different vowel. Old Japanese poetry provides evidence that this process of vowel-vowel reduction extends beyond morphology, and is active at higher prosodic levels. In the poetry of the *Man'yōshū* (completed c. 759 C.E.), many vowel-vowel sequences occur at word boundaries, but the lines in which such sequences are found are very frequently hypermetrical as written, leading scholars since the nineteenth century to posit that the sequences were reduced in recitation, resulting in metrical lines (hypermetricity resulting from an excess of pure CV-type syllables is extremely rare, providing further evidence in favor of this hypothesis). In fact, the correlation of VV-sequences and hypermetricity can be much more finely articulated: the only time line-internal VV sequences are metrically licit is in poem-internal long (seven syllable) lines, and then only in certain syllable positions.

In this paper I provide an exhaustive quantitative analysis of the distribution of V-type syllables in the poetry of the *Man'yōshū*, and on this base, I propose a more refined analysis of hiatus specifically, and of Old Japanese metrics in general. Under my theory, hiatus is metrical only when the VV-sequence straddles a caesura position in the middle of a poem-internal long line (caesurae most frequently fall between the third and fourth, or between the fourth and fifth syllable positions). The post-caesura syllable is a metrically strong position at the left edge of a hemistich, and so permits the appearance of the marked onsetless syllable type; similar, even stronger, positions occur at the left edges of lines, and, again, at the left edges of two- or three-line strophes, and finally in the poem-initial position. Consequently, the distribution of onsetless syllables in Old Japanese poetry provides evidence for the existence of an articulated metrical hierarchy comprising four levels: poem > strophe > line > hemistich. An analysis of the poetry of the *Man'yōshū* confirms that metrically licit onsetless syllables are distributed along this

hierarchy, with greatest frequency in poem-initial positions, and lowest frequency in hemistich-initial positions. With only a handful of exceptions, onsetless syllables in other positions are not metrically licit, i.e., they result in hypermetrical lines if scanned as written.