

Title: How cognition shapes the typology of verse form

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Verse, defined broadly as “discourse organized in lines” (Hymes 1977), encompasses a variety of phenomena such as poetry, song, and nursery rhymes. As far as we know, verse is practised by every human society and, although it displays significant variation, certain patterns are found much more frequently than others. This paper argues that the asymmetry between common/uncommon patterns can be partially explained by aspects of human cognition shared across populations.

First, I provide an overview of this research programme, which combines typological and experimental work in order to better understand formal aspects of verse. Second, I present two case studies. The first study shows that poets across-cultures tend to stick to the template more strictly towards the end of lines, and argues through experimental data that this may be a result of an increase in attention across the line. The second study is based on typological evidence that verse constituents are usually subdivided into sections, although not exceeding four identical sections adjacently. An iterated-learning experiment using pseudo-verse stimuli indicates that this kind of chunked structures may emerge in the process of cultural transmission partly due to limits in numeric cognition.

References

Hymes, D. 1977. Discovering oral performance and measured verse in American Indian narrative. *New Literary History* 8(3). 431–457.