

Chapter 10

Excursus on Hungarian Poetry and Poetry Recital

In Hungarian poetry, in addition to its native metric system based on two line segments each of which must begin with a stressed syllable, there is a system imported from Western classical literature, based on the systematic alternation of long and short syllables. The rules of this quantitative system are quite straightforward: a weak position is occupied by a short syllable, a strong position by a long one. However, what counts as a long or a short syllable is slightly less straightforward. In order to explain the nature of syllable length, we must adopt from phonology a hierarchy of syllable weight. Syllable structure may be indicated by the letters c (for consonants) and v (for vowels); long vowels are marked as vv. Accordingly, the structure of a syllable may be, in a decreasing order of weight, (c)vvc; (c)vv; (c)vc; (c)v (the brackets enclosing the initial c suggest that it is optional from the metrical point of view). Long vowels are marked by single or double “accents” over the letter, as in *á, é, í, ó, ő, ú* and *ű*; short vowels by single or double dots, or by no marks at all, as in *a, e, i, o, ö, u* and *ü*.¹

The boundary between long and short syllables is drawn on this scale, typically, before the last item, (c)v; that is, a syllable is “short” when its structure is (c)v, or, to be more precise, when its vowel is separated from the next vowel by one consonant at most, irrespective of word boundary. All other syllable structures are “long”. This applies in all strictness to the ternary metres (that is, the anapest, the amphibrach and the dactyl) and, to a considerable extent, to the trochaic. As I have elsewhere argued at length (Tsur, 1977: 83-96), the iambic is more tolerant of deviations than the other metres in all languages I know, both in the syllabo-tonic and the quantitative metric systems. This is most conspicuously true of Hungarian. Here the boundary between short and long syllables moves slightly up on the scale. The (c)vc structure (that is, a syllable whose vowel is separated from the next vowel by two consonants, irrespective of word boundary) is ambiguous: it may serve as “short” or “long”, as the metric pattern may require. Thus, for instance, the syllable *ham-* in excerpt 1 occurs in a weak position; rarely, even a cvv syllable, as *-sá* in

¹ As for marking a long vowel as vv, in Hungarian this may be even etymologically adequate in some instances. In Hungarian there is a suffix (with roughly the meaning of the preposition “on”), consisting of a vowel (depending on vowel harmony) + n. If the word ends with a consonant, the vowel of this suffix is short; if it ends with a short vowel, this short vowel disappears, and the vowel of the suffix is long. Consider the following four words: *ház* (=house); *háza* (=his house); *házon* (=on a house); *házán* (=on his house).

Click here to go to the sound files for this chapter:
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the same word may occur in a weak position. In the trochaic such deviations are less tolerable, and therefore very rare; in the ternary metres they are virtually nonexistent.

In Hungarian, the first syllable of each word is, invariably, the stressed one. This, very frequently, generates a conflict of prominences in Hungarian verse. We find quite frequently in Hungarian iambic verse that the first syllable of the word is short (but stressed), and occupies a weak position, whereas the next syllable is long (but unstressed), and occupies a strong position. Consequently, the first syllable should be prominent on linguistic grounds, and non-prominent on metrical grounds; with the second syllable it is the other way around. As we shall see, there are some crucial positions in the iambic pentameter line in which the conflict disappears, and the two kinds of prominences combine.

In Hungarian theatre culture there is a superb tradition of poetry recital. One of its greatest feats consists in the rhythmical solution of this paradoxical state of affairs. The most satisfactory solutions one may encounter in the iambic, less frequently in the trochaic metre; in the ternary metres, actors usually fail to solve the problem. I consider an acceptable solution of the problem to be when the main stresses of Hungarian prose language are tolerably preserved and, at the same time, the metric pattern of the poem is perceptible to the reader or listener. This is especially difficult because, as D.B. Fry's experiments suggest, duration is an effective acoustic cue for stress. He found that duration overrides amplitude, whereas pitch overrides duration as a cue for stress. Thus, a long syllable may be perceived as stressed as well. As we shall see, performers may sidestep the problem by lengthening the closing consonant rather than the vowel.

Consider the first line of the poem "Esti Sugárkoszorú" ("An evening garland of rays"), by the great Hungarian symbolist poet, Árpád Tóth:

1. Ēlöttünk már hāmvassá vālt az ūt
 w s w s w s w s w s
 (Before us, the road already became ashen)

The dashes over the text indicate the stressed syllables. All other syllables are unstressed.

In this verse line only the last three syllables constitute a string in which all variables join forces to constitute a pattern of regularly alternating strong and weak events, with no conflict of prominences: two long and stressed syllables occupying strong positions enclose one unstressed and short syllable occupying a weak position. There is one more single event in which all elements are strong, that is, long and stressed syllables occupying a strong position: "már", whose structural function we shall see in a moment. In all the other syllables there is at least one feature that conflicts with the requirements of the position they occupy, strong or weak.

When we were school kids in Hungary, we used to "scan" such verse lines by suppressing the linguistic elements that conflicted with the metrical pattern. At the other end, there are actors and persons insensitive to poetic rhythm who suppress the metric pattern such that the text is perceived as nonmetered prose. In the middle,

some actors and nonprofessional reciters of poetry attempt to eat the cake and have it: to strike an acceptable balance, in which both the linguistic and the metric pattern become perceptible. This is a “rhythmical performance”. Thus, in Hungarian poetry as well, a “rhythmical performance” becomes a perceptual solution to a perceptual problem.

An exquisite example of this is Zoltán Latinovits’s performance of excerpt 1 (see Figures 1-2). It should be noticed that the “long” vowel *ó* (141 msec) is only insignificantly longer than the preceding “short” vowel /*ε*/ (137 msec). The perceptual prominence of the first syllable (indicating linguistic stress) is established by the falling-and-rising intonation contour in a semi-circle (see Figure 1), until the small loop half way up (the rest of the contour, up to the loop at the peak, belongs to the /*l*/).

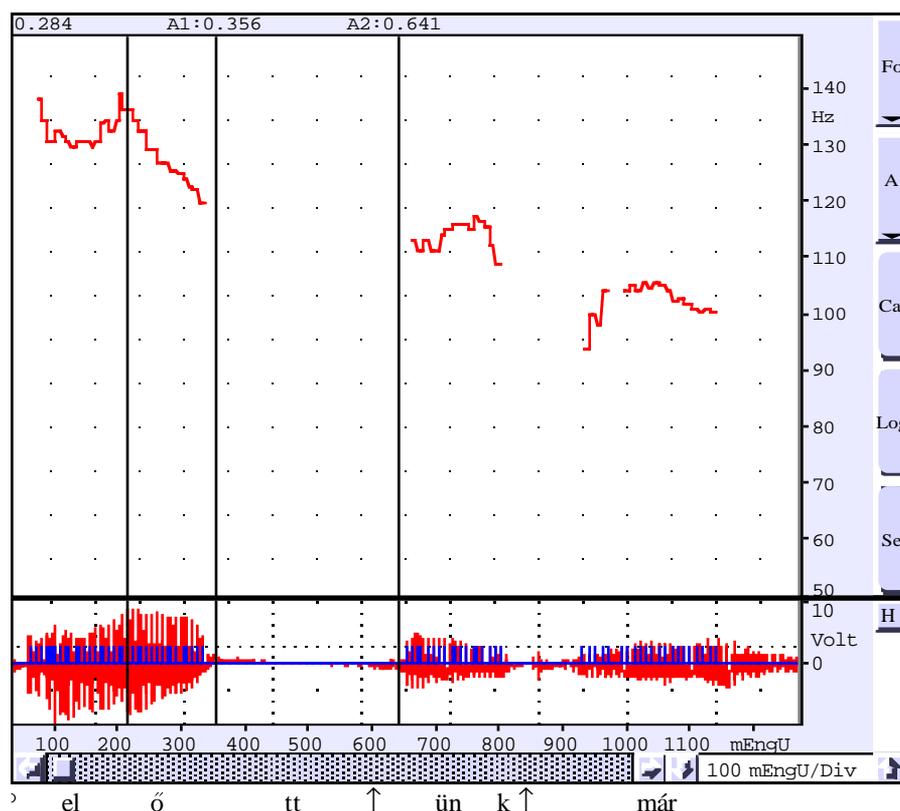


Figure 1 Wave plot and F₀ extract of “Előttünk már” in Latinovits’s reading (? indicates a glottal stop, ↑ indicates a stop release)

The listener clearly perceives some distinct prominence on the second syllable as well; this may be due, to a limited extent, to the elaborate intonation contour on

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“-lǒ-”; but mainly to duration. But, as we have seen, the long *ó* is only insignificantly longer than the preceding short */ε/*. The exceptionally long duration is due to an exceptionally long double */t/* (284 msec), more than twice as long as the preceding long vowel. Here an exceptionally long period of silence (interpreted as the closure of the tongue) is followed by a distinct release. By comparison, this is 6.3 times longer than the word final */k/* (indicated by a short pause and an exceptionally distinct release [45 msec]). This double */t/* is perceived, indeed, as unnaturally long and exceptionally well-articulated. Thus, the same articulatory gesture is over-determined: it has three different functions relevant, according to the assumptions underlying the present study, to the perception of poetic rhythm: it over-articulates the phoneme, over-articulates the syllable boundary, and indicates a strong position, by an exceptionally long duration. At the same time, the vowel remains relatively short, as demanded in a closed syllable, so that its prominence does not override the linguistic stress of the first syllable.

Syntactically, the adverbial of time, “már” (“already”), ought to be grouped more closely with the ensuing predicate than with the preceding adverbial of place “elót-tünk” (“before us”). Perceptually, however, the first four syllables are grouped together (as I shall argue, to satisfy the needs of a rhythmical performance). As can be seen from the pitch extract, “már” is part of what Knowles calls “an internally defined prosodic pattern” (the intonation contour consistently falling from the second to the fourth syllable); whereas the leap of pitch from “már” to “ham-” (see Figure 3) indicates the beginning of a new tone group (pitch discontinuation). The first four syllables constitute, then, a relatively unified whole, segregated from the following unit, in which the first (stressed but short) syllable disturbs metric regularity; the next two syllables vaguely indicate their respective strong and weak positions; and then, in the fourth position, the utterance achieves “focal stability”: a stressed and long syllable occupies a strong position. During this period of disturbance and uncertainty, the metric pattern reverberates in the back of one’s mind; certainty is achieved only at the fourth syllable. The greater the disturbance and uncertainty, the greater the relief when focal stability is finally achieved, *provided that the metric pattern is not totally lost in awareness*. If the metric pattern is totally lost in awareness, disturbance and uncertainty disappear, no focal stability is achieved, and no relief is brought. This structure also indicates the discontinuity (without a pause) after the fourth position, required by the (unmarked) caesura.

A very similar story can be told about the next four syllables, “hamvassá vált”. I have said that in the iambic metre a *cvc* syllable may be ambiguous: in a weak position it may be considered “short”, in a strong position “long”. The first two syllables of “hamvassá” have the *cvc* structure; the first one is stressed but occupies a weak position, the next one is unstressed and occupies a strong position. Here, too, the second vowel is followed by a double consonant */ʃʃ/*. Consider the durations of these phonemes in milliseconds: *h*=91; *a*=81; *m*=184; *v*=38; *a*=84; *ss*=337; *á*=253. Here again an elaborate pitch contour generates the greatest prominence (of linguistic significance) on the first syllable, and greater than usual duration of the double */ʃ/*

generates the prominence (of metric significance) in the second syllable. Again, this double /j/ is perceived as unnaturally long and exceptionally well-articulated and is, indeed, four times longer than the preceding (short) vowel.

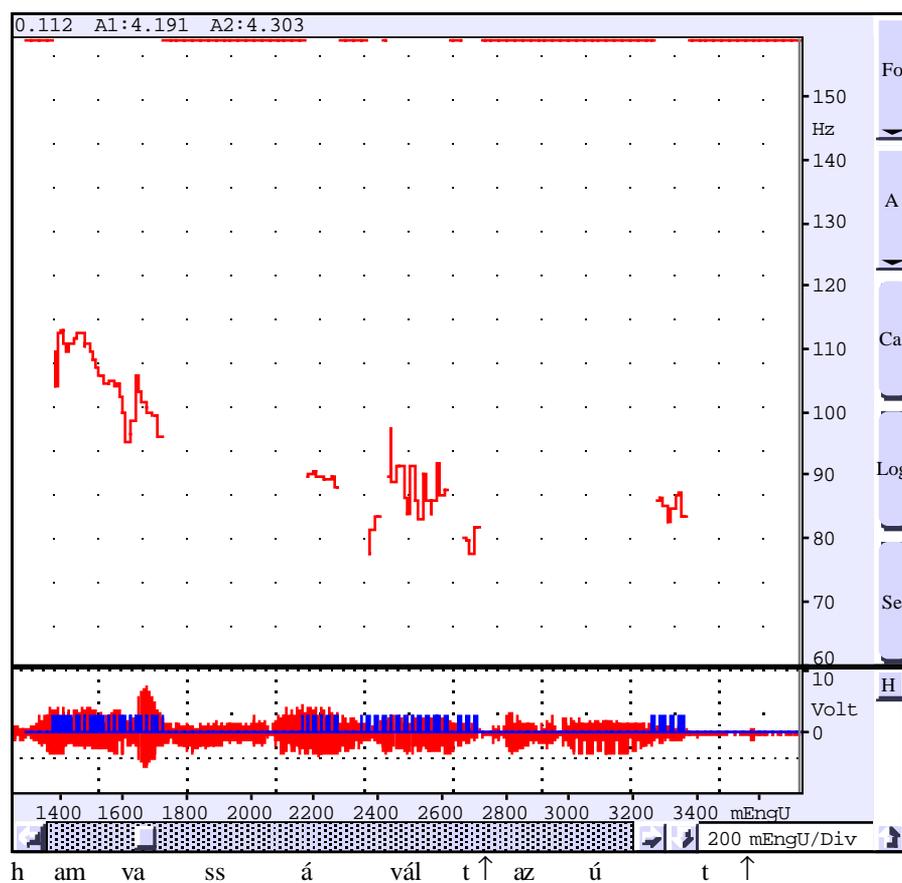


Figure 2 Wave plot and F_0 extract of “hamvassá vált az út” in Latinovits’s reading; ↑ indicates a stop release

Needless to say, here too one articulatory gesture fulfills the same three functions of rhythmical interest as in the foregoing instance. Here too a unified group of four syllables is generated, in which the first (stressed) syllable disturbs metric regularity; the next two syllables vaguely indicate their respective strong and weak positions; and then, in the fourth position, the utterance achieves “focal stability”: a stressed and long syllable occupies a strong position. Roughly the same psychological responses may be said to take place here too, with two notable differences. First, the first perceptual unit begins at the line onset (which is a stable point) and ends at the unmarked caesura (which is the most stable point in midline); whereas the second

perceptual unit begins at the unmarked caesura, and ends in the eighth position (which is one of the least stable strong positions in the line). Second, the first perceptual unit is continuous with, and segregated from, the next segment, whereas the second perceptual unit is *not* segregated from its sequel. As a result, the focal stability achieved in the eighth position is less stable than the one achieved in the fourth position, for two reasons: it is achieved at a less stable point of the line, and the phrase is more fluidly continuous with its sequel. The relative weakening of the line at this point foregrounds the completion of the line as an iambic pentameter by the last three syllables that display perfect regularity. Had the reciter suggested some discontinuity after the eighth position, he would have obtained a perceptually strong unit divided into two symmetrical halves, that would have left the last two syllables less integrated in the whole.

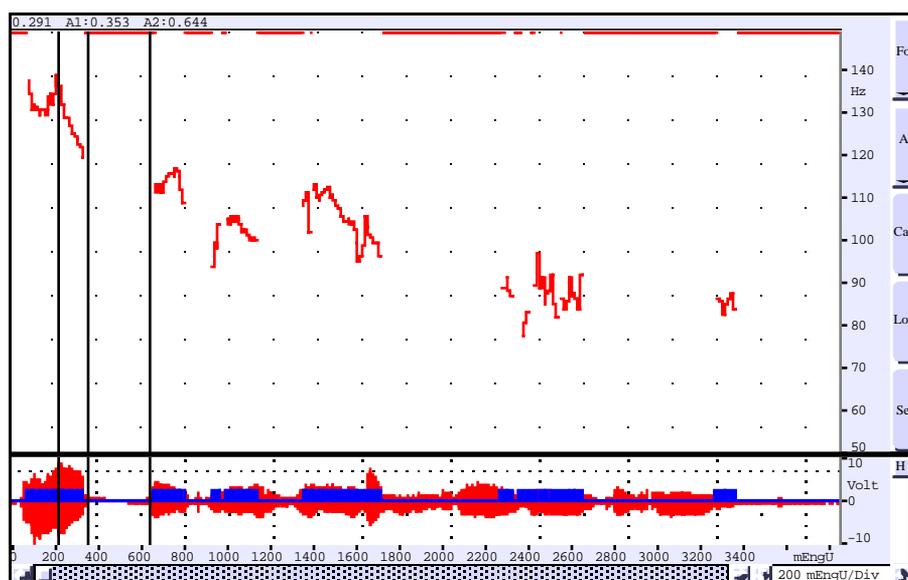


Figure 3 Wave plot and F_0 extract of “Előttünk már hamvassá vált az út”

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The cognitive strategies deployed in this reading are astonishingly similar to those we have found in the readings of English poetry and, one might add, utilized for the same purpose: to accommodate the conflicting patterns of prose rhythm and metre in a rhythmical performance. When we look, however, at the details of this conflict, we find that the problems that arise in English and Hungarian versification are very different. Unlike in Hungarian poetry, where the problems arise mainly from a conflict between two kinds of prominence, English versification is based on the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. In English, however, the over-

whelming majority of words are monosyllabics; consequently, we may obtain strings of two, three, four, five or six consecutive stressed syllables.

In Chapter 3 I quoted Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen's book on English prosody:

It is a basic principle of English speech rhythm that stressed and unstressed syllables alternate rather regularly. Consequently if an utterance contains a succession of, say, three monosyllabic words from stressable word categories, e.g. *'big 'black 'bugs*, the intermediate stress may be dropped in order to achieve a more regular alternation, e.g. *'big black 'bugs*. [...] Finally if two major stresses are adjacent to one another in a phrase or utterance, e.g. *thir'teen 'men*, under certain conditions one may be moved forward: *'thirteen 'men* [...] in order to more nearly approximate an alternating rhythm (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986: 37).

This observational fact in English could easily adjust stress pattern to the iambic pattern. Nonetheless, there is another observational fact, that some of the greatest present-day British actors are inclined to perform in iambic verse such strings of consecutive stresses with equally heavy stress, heavily overarticulating the syllable boundaries, and sometimes also the phonemes. This appears to be in harmony with certain aesthetic conceptions which I have expounded in the preceding chapters, as well as with the requirements of the psychological model presented above. I could be accused, though nobody has so far accused me, that I am over-psychologizing the issue. The same over-articulation of word boundaries in such instances could be accounted for by a much simpler empirical observation of Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen's:

Several stresses *can* be articulated in immediate succession if the syllables bearing them are lengthened appropriately, or if pseudo-pause is inserted: *'big— 'black— 'bugs*, *thir'teen— 'men*. Likewise, additional stress beats need not be added in a sequence of unstressed syllables if the rate of delivery is appropriately fast. [...] The slower the rate of delivery, the closer together the stresses come (Couper-Kuhlen, 38).

To this objection I could answer that though in the poetic instances in question the syllables are lengthened indeed, no pseudo-pauses are inserted; most frequently there are no measurable pauses between the words: discontinuity is indicated only by terminal intonation contours and by the insertion of word-final stop releases and word-initial glottal stops, wherever appropriate (this could also count as phoneme over-articulation). But this answer appears trivial as compared to my next two arguments. First, it is assumed here that reciters will attempt to have recourse, wherever possible, to the prosodic patterns and vocal devices available to them in their spoken language (that is, e.g., "several stresses *can* be articulated in immediate succession if the syllables bearing them are lengthened appropriately"); but this will be subsumed to one overall purpose: to save mental processing space so as to render

the suspended metric pattern reverberating in the back of one's mind accessible to the perceiving consciousness. Second, the Hungarian precedent appears to support my original claim: here the over-articulation of syllable boundaries occurs not at consecutive stressed syllables of monosyllabics, but at conflicting prominences in the middle of polysyllabics; and rather than over-articulating by intonation contours, the consonants separating the vowels are over-articulated.