ACCENT. In Eng., accent is the auditory prominence perceived in one syllable as compared with others in its vicinity. Accent and stress are often treated as synonymous, though some literary scholars and linguists distinguish the two terms according to a variety of criteria. Disagreements persist about the source and acoustical nature of syllabic prominence—loudness, volume, pitch, duration, or some combination of factors—but they are arguably of peripheral relevance to the understanding of accent within Eng. poetics.

The phenomena of accent vary among langs., and the poetics associated with them. The Eng. lexical contrast between convict as noun and as verb has no parallel in Fr. (Sp. resembles Eng. in this regard, while Finnish resembles Fr.) For Fr. speakers, stress contours are perceived on the level of the phrase or clause, and learning Eng. entails acquiring the ability to hear contrastive accent in words, just as a Japanese speaker learning Eng. must acquire the distinction between the liquids /l/ and r. A consequence is that, while Fr. *meters count only syllables, Eng. meters conventionally also govern the number and distribution of accents.

In Eng. speech, accent operates in various ways on scales from the word (convict) through the sentence. As the units grow larger, accent becomes increasingly available to choice and conscious use for rhetorical emphasis. One step beyond the accents recorded in dicts. is the difference between “Spanish teacher” as a compound (a person who teaches Sp.) and as a phrase (a teacher from Spain). Eng. phonology enjoins stronger accent on “Spanish” in the compound and “teacher” in the phrase.

These lexical accents and differences in accent between compounds and phrases are “hardwired” into the Eng. lang. Beyond those, speakers exercise more deliberate choice when they employ contrasting accent to create rhetorical or logical emphasis that are intimately entwined with semantic context. In the opposition Chicago White Sox vs. Chicago Cubs, it is the variable rather than the fixed element that receives the accent. Consequently, the question “Are you a fan of the Chicago Cubs?” accords with what we know about the world of baseball, while “Are you a fan of the Chicago Cubs?” implies a Cubs team from some other city. This kind of contrastive stress, so dynamic in Eng. speech, also plays a variety of important roles in the poetic manipulation of lang., perhaps esp. in how written poetry contrives to convey the rhetorical and intonational contours of speech.

When a line break, for instance, encourages the reader to place an accent on some word where it would not normally be expected, the emphasis may suggest an unanticipated logical contrast. This foregrounding of accent may have rhetorical implications: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster” (emphasis inferred; Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art”); “The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter [not Ac- tacoon to Diana] in the spring” (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land).

Within the specific realm of traditional Eng. metrical verse, words are treated as bearing an accent if they are short polysyllables (whose stress can be looked up in a dict.) or monosyllables that belong to an open class (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection). Other syllables tend to be unstressed. Yet several factors can alter this perception. One is the kind of rhetorical force created by contrastive stress, esp. in the volatile case of pronouns. Another, more pervasive influence arises from the complex interaction between the abstract, narrowly constrained pattern of meter and the concrete, highly contingent “rhythm of the spoken words.” This fundamental distinction—meter and rhythm are related similarly to “the human face” and “a human’s face”—crucially conditions how we perceive accent; it accounts for some difficulties that an unpracticed reader of metrical verse, though a native of Eng. speech, may have in locating the accents in a line.

Some of the confusion surrounding the term may be reduced if we recognize that accent names phenomena on two different levels of abstraction, the acoustical and the metrical. There is an analogy with phonemes. Speakers of Eng. unconsciously insert a puff of air after the p in pan, but not in span. The difference can be detected by using acoustic instruments or by holding a palm in front of the mouth, yet is not detected by speakers in the absence of exceptional

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attention. The p in both cases represents the same phoneme, the same distinctive feature in the Eng.

phonetic system—a system that does not merely divide the continuous acoustic stream of speech but abstracts from it a small set of three or four dozen discrete items. Similarly, various acoustical phenomena (pitch, loudness, etc.) give rise to an indefinitely large number of degrees and perhaps even kinds of accent; yet within a metrical context, the accustomed reader—analagous to a native speaker—reduces this continuum to an abstraction of (usually) two opposed values, stressed vs. unstressed. (The analogy fails to capture how the reader is simultaneously aware of a continuum of stress weights in the speech rhythm and a binary feature in the metrical pattern, both embodied in a single set of words.)

Differences of accent between compounds and phrases, or introduced for the sake of rhetorical contrast, which operate prominently within the larger manifold of rhythm, make no difference on the level of meter. “Spanish teacher” in either sense would be scanned as two *trochees, and the stronger stress on one word or the other has no specifically metrical effect. The four degrees of stress adopted by Chatman and others from Trager and Smith, while useful in the phonological analysis of Eng. and in the poetic understanding of rhythm, are unnecessary in the specifically metrical treatment of accent. The “four levels” represent an intermediate abstraction, as does the more traditional compromise of secondary stress or the hovering accent of Brooks and Warren. “Trager and Smith... demonstrated that stress and pitch are much more complex and variable phenomena than could be accounted for by the binary unstress-stress relation of traditional prosody” (Bradford 1994)—but this important truth should not mislead us into trying to weld speech rhythm and metrical pattern into an unwieldy whole, rather than hearing their interplay.

Readers are sensitive to a far wider range of rhythmic phenomena in poetry than those that are encoded within a metrical system. The nuanced stress patterns of speech, though they are foregrounded in nonmetrical or “free verse, do not disappear from the reader’s awareness in metrical verse with its two-valued feature of accent. Rather, the give and take between the claims of meter and rhythm become a major source of auditory richness. Syllables may be heard as stressed either because of their prominence in speech or because of their position within the metrical line.

Any of the kinds of speech accent—lexical, phrasal, rhetorical—may coincide with a stressed position within the metrical line (as in the even-numbered positions within an “iambic *pentameter); or the speech and metrical accents may be momentarily out of phase. Within the accentual-syllabic system of Eng. metrics, these possibilities give rise to a repertoire of more or less common or striking variations. When speech accents occur in metrically unstressed positions, they give rise to metrical substitutions of one foot for another, such as the trochee or the *spondee for the iamb:

/ x / / /

Singest of summer in full-throated case

When metrical accents occur where no speech accent is available to embody them, the syllable receives “promoted” stress. The conjunction in the middle of W. B. Yeats’s line, “We loved each other and were ignorant,” which might pass unstressed in speech, exhibits this kind of promoted accent. It may render the verse line different from and semantically richer than its speech equivalent. The metrical expectation of accent in this position in the line is presumably the initial cause of the promotion; whether the rhetorical point—that love and ignorance are not at odds as one might think, but inextricable—is an effect or another kind of cause would be difficult to decide.

The phonological and metrical understandings of accent can sometimes even be directly at odds. In a compound word like *townsman, the second syllable is not unstressed (its vowel is not reduced to schwa). Phonologically, then, the syllable sequence “townsman of” presents three descending levels of stress. In A. E. Housman’s line, however, “Townsmen of a stiller town,” the reader hears “of” with an accent created or promoted by the underlying metrical pattern of iambic *tetrameter; and in comparison, the syllable “-man” is heard as unstressed. The case is complicated by the copresence of other details: because the line is headless, e.g., we know not to scan the initial compound word as a spondee only once we get the following syllables (“a still-”); the unambiguous accent on the last of those syllables (confirmed by the final alternation, “-er town”) anchors the whole iambic matrix and retrospectively clarifies the metrical role of “Townsmen of.” Complications of this kind are typical in the interaction between metrical pattern and speech rhythms and constitute

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a primary reason for apparent ambiguities of accent in lines of Eng. verse.

See demotion.


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