

Title	The metrical arrangement of finite verbs in Beowulf
Sub Title	古英詩『ベーオウルフ』における定動詞の韻律的配置
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2021
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.120, (2021. 6) ,p.215 (26)- 227 (14)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	<a href="https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01200001-0215">https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-01200001-0215</a>

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# The Metrical Arrangement of Finite Verbs in *Beowulf*

Huayu LI

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes, in the prosody of Old English poetry, there are matters that cannot be explained by the prosodic regulation alone. One of them is the relationship between metrical stress and alliteration. Should a metrical stress correspond to a stress of alliterating word? This problem often occurs in finite verbs as well as some adverbs and pronouns. In this paper, I will discuss how the position of a finite verb in a half-verse relates to metrical stress and alliteration. Moreover, I will suggest the necessity to divide finite verbs into lexical and grammatical since their places that tend to put in half-lines are different.

Finite verbs, are classified as *Satzpartikeln*, with pronouns, adverbs, participles and conjunctions by Kuhn.<sup>1</sup> His classification is based on a grammatical distinction divided into three degrees of rhythmic stress: *Satzteile*, *Satzteilpartikeln* and *Satzpartikeln*. He maintains that unlike *Satzteile* (including nouns, adjectives and infinitive verbs), which bear a metrical stress, *Satzteilpartikeln* (including possessive adjectives, articles, prepositions, unstressed prefixes) and *Satzpartikeln* are normally metrically stressless.<sup>2</sup> Based on these three categories, Kuhn formulates two laws of placement of *Satzteilpartikeln* and *Satzpartikeln* in a verse.<sup>3</sup> The first law (*Satzpartikelgesetz*) is:

Die Satzpartikeln stehen in der ersten Senkung des Satzes, in der Proklise entweder zu seinem ersten oder zweiten betonten Worte.

Additionally, the second law (*Satzspitzengesetz*) is

Das Satzpartikelgesetz verbietet es, die Satzpartikeln, wenn mehrere da sind, auf beide möglichen Stellen zu verteilen, sowie sie vor das zweite betonte Wort zu stellen, wenn vor dem ersten durch Satzteilpartikeln oder unbetonte Vorsilben ein Auftakt gebildet wird.

*Satzpartikeln* is placed in the first dip of the clause, in the place that is either before the clause's first or second stressed word with *Satzteilpartikeln*. Alternatively, if they are displaced from these positions, which Kuhn formulated, they bear metrical stress.<sup>4</sup> For instance:

x x / x / / x / x<sup>5</sup>

*wæs* se g rimma gæst Grendel hāten, (*Beowulf* 102a-b)<sup>6</sup>

[was the fierce demon Grendel called,]

/ x / \ x x x / x /

mære mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold (*Beo* 103a-b)

[notorious mark-stepper who moor occupied]

The two finite verbs, both *wæs* and *hēold* are *Satzpartikeln*, but the former as a clause-initial finite verb does not bear metrical stress, whereas the latter does since it is displaced.

Kuhn's two laws apparently have violations, and they have often been challenged and modified (see Russon (1996), Momma (1997) and Donoghue (1997)).<sup>7</sup> One of the conceivable exceptions is alliterating finite verbs in the clause-initial position.

## 2. The Rule of Alliteration in *Beowulf*

Before discussing the issue of finite verb in detail, it is necessary to specify the assumed rule of alliteration. As a result of investigating the pattern of alliteration in *Beowulf*, this law can be seen: the second lift does not alliterate alone in either a-verse or b-verse. In

the first place, the following patterns of alliteration can be found in *Beowulf*:

(1) pattern [AX : AY]<sup>8</sup>

x / x / / x / x

on **f**lōdes **ǣ**ht **f**eor gewītan (*Beo* 42)

[in of-ocean possession far go]

(2) pattern [XA : AY]

/ \ x / / x / x

brūnfāgne **h**elm, **h**ringde byrnan (*Beo* 2615)

[bright- coloured chain mail]

(3) pattern [AA : AY]

/ x / x x x / x x /

**f**ēasceaft **f**unden. **H**ē þæs **f**rōfre gebād (*Beo* 7)

[destitute found he for-that consolation experienced]

(4) pattern [AA : AA] or [AX : AA]

x / x x / x x x / / x

for**h**abban in **h**reþre. Ðā wæs **h**eal **h**roden (*Beo* 1151b)

[to-hold back in heart. Then was hall covered]

Pattern [XA : AY] does not exist except example (2) in *Beowulf*, and this instance is thought to be word order reversal.<sup>9</sup> Pattern [AA : AA] or [AX : AA] with double alliteration in b-verse like example (4), can be emended except two instances (*Beo* 1251b, 1351b). These which suggested to be emended are:

ðā wæs **h**eal **h**roden (*Beo* 1151b) *roden*

**h**ild gehnægdon (*Beo* 2916b) *genægdon*

in **ē**owrum gūðgeatawum (*Beo* 395b) *gūðgetawum*

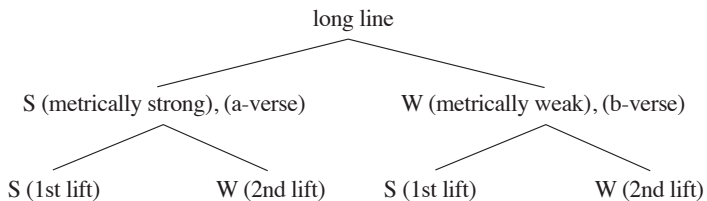
þæt ic mid sweorde ofslōh (*Beo* 574b) *ābrēat*

Therefore, none of the instances of pattern [XA : AY] in a-verses exists after emendation, and a pattern [AX : YA] whose second lift alliterates alone does not exist. Furthermore, the pattern of double alliteration in b-verse ([AA : AA] or [AX : AA]) has few instances. It is attempted to explain these facts by the theory of metrical tree structure.<sup>10</sup> In Old English poetry, there often occurs a half-line composed of a compound, such as:

/ x / x  
**hilde**lēoman (*Beo* 1143b, 2583a)  
 [battle-gleamer]

/ x / \ x  
**mere**liðende (*Beo* 255a)  
 [sea-farers]

This theory suggests that the metrical structure of half-line “mimics” the stress pattern of a compound: just as the stress on the first element (i.e., *hilde-*, *mere-*) is stronger than that on the second element (i.e., *-lēoman*, *-liðende*), so the first lift in a half-line is metrically stronger than the second lift. The metrical structure of a long line also reflects the compound stress pattern. The metrical tree structure of a line and a half-line can be represented in the following tree diagram:<sup>11</sup>



In this metrical structure, the first lifts of both a-verse and b-verse, which are the stronger metrical constituents in their respective half-lines, always take part in alliteration; on the other hand, the second lift of the off-verse governed by two metrically weak constituents, so that it becomes metrically weakest and should not alliterate.

The theory of metrical tree structure can explain cruces why the second lift does not alliterate alone in either a-verse or b-verse, at first glance. However, there remain two unresolved issues. First, if only alliteration of first lifts in their respective half-lines relates to the metrical structure of a long line, does an alliteration of the second lift in a double alliterated half-line have only ornamental function,<sup>12</sup> just as that in the crossed alliteration of the pattern [AB : AB]? In the pattern [AB : AB], alliteration of second lifts in both a-verse and b-verse should be regarded as ornamental and distinguished from the systematic alliteration of first lifts in their respective half-lines:<sup>13</sup>

/ x / x x x x / x /  
 snottra fengel, nū ic eom siðes fūs (*Beo* 1475)  
 A    B                    A    B

If this assumption was correct, this sort of “ornamental” alliteration in a double alliteration could be seen everywhere. Just as Bliss says that this insignificant alliteration may be “a work of supererogation” by the *Beowulf* poet. He explains the difference between “accidental” and “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration thus:

‘Accidental’ alliteration is only to be assumed where the word concerned is so insignificant that its participation in the alliteration might reasonably escape the notice of the poet. However, even if ‘accidental’ alliteration is improbable, there remains the possibility of ‘ornamental’ or ‘non-functional’ alliteration; that is to say, a word whose stress is not significant in the metrical pattern may be made to alliterate by the poet as a work of supererogation.<sup>14</sup>

Does the existence of these “ornamental” alliteration without metrical stress suggest that more alliteration is preferred?

Second, should we consider the half-line whose first lift alliterates, yet follows several dips as a variation of pattern [XA : AY]? Such rhythmic type is classified as Type A3 (xx/x) by Sievers<sup>15</sup> and Type a (xx/x), d (x/xx) and e (xxx/) by Bliss,<sup>16</sup> such as:

x x x x x / x

Hī hyne þā æt**b**æron

[They him then bore]

Should this rhythmic type include the case which a clause-initial finite verb participate in a double alliteration? For instance:

wēox under wolcnum (*Beo* 8a)

[grew under sky]

If the finite verb *wēox* in the original position of *Satzpartikeln* bore a metrical stress, then *wolcnum* as a *Satzteile* would be “ornamental” alliteration. Nevertheless, no alliterated finite verb in this position is rare, just as I will discuss in section five.

### 3. Bliss’s Study (1967)

In his study of *Beowulf*, Bliss examined whether a finite verb alliterated or not when it was not preceded by the first lift in a verse. He found 580 instances and classified them broadly into two groups: auxiliaries (with quasi-auxiliaries that correlate with a dependent infinitive) and non-auxiliaries. Out of 165 instances of auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries, alliterating verbs accounted for only 29 (18 percent).<sup>17</sup> Out of the 415 instances of non-auxiliaries that had relatively full semantic significance, alliterating verbs were 335 (81 percent). He divided these non-auxiliaries into nine groups according to the position of the verb in the verse clause:

- (1) The verb is preceded by a stressed element [*Satzteile*];
- (2) The verb is in apposition to a verb in group (1) that immediately precedes it;
- (3) The verb is the only particle [*Satzpartikeln*] before the first stressed element;
- (4) The verb is the last particle before the first stressed element;
- (5) The verb is the last particle but one before the first stressed element;
- (6) The verb is the last particle but two before the first stressed element;

- (7) The verb forms a whole clause in itself;
- (8) The verb is the last particle in a clause that contains no stressed elements;
- (9) The verb is the last particle but one in a clause that contains no stressed elements.<sup>18</sup>

Out of these nine groups, the finite verbs of groups (1) and (2) bear stresses and alliteration (except for two instances in group (2));<sup>19</sup>

Bliss claims that these instances must be treated as *Satzteile* because the finite verbs of these verses have been displaced from their normal position among the *Satzpartikeln* and moved to the beginning of the clause.<sup>20</sup> In group (4), since the verb is the last of a number of *Satzpartikeln* before the first *Satzteile*, it is assimilated into the *Satzteile* and alliterates (except for two instances).<sup>21</sup> As is the case with (4), the finite verb of (8) also cannot be scanned at all unless the verb is stressed and alliterated.<sup>22</sup> However, Bliss does not say whether the alliteration of (4) and (8) is “accidental” or what he calls “ornamental” or “non-functional”.<sup>23</sup>

Bliss found “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration when he analysed group (3). While the frequency of the occurrence of “accidental” alliteration is about one in twelve, that of alliterating finite verbs is about three in four. This occurrence is indeed far too frequent to be accidental, as Bliss claims. Since in group (3) the finite verb is placed in the normal position for a *Satzpartikeln*, Bliss leaves room for consideration of whether it is “accidental” alliteration or not, and then suggests the possibility of “ornamental” or “non-functional” alliteration.<sup>24</sup> In group (5), the finite verb alliterates in slightly over half the total instances, and all the alliteration is found in verbs without stress.<sup>25</sup> Following Kuhn’s “Law of Particles (*Satzpartikelgesetz*)”,<sup>26</sup> Bliss does not treat the verb of (5) as a *Satzteile* in these verses; moreover, he points out that in many cases a stress on the *Satzpartikeln* will produce an impossible metrical pattern, so he treats them as a non-functional alliteration that is not stressed.<sup>27</sup> In group (6), Bliss claims that none of the finite verbs need to be stressed because when the verb is the last *Satzpartikeln* but two before the *Satzteile*, the alliteration is non-functional.<sup>28</sup>

With one exception<sup>29</sup> all the verses in group (7) are b-verses, and all the finite verbs alliterate but one;<sup>30</sup> however, they are not stressed. Like group (5), the finite verb of (9) is stressed only when the metre absolutely requires it; five verses of (9), in which the verb alliterates, have double alliteration, and Bliss assumes that it is non-functional.<sup>31</sup>



#### 4. Momma's Study (1996)

One problem appears in Bliss's treatment of alliterating finite verbs: he does not explain why we cannot construe as a stressed component a finite verb that alliterates and precedes one alliterating word (i.e., in a double alliterating verse), such as:

*geaf* him ða mid Geatum (*Beo*, 2623a)  
[gave (war-gears to) him then among Geatas]

in his group (6). Applying Momma's scansion, neither “/ x x x / x” with metrical stress on the finite verb *geaf*, nor “x x x x / x” without metrical stress on *geaf* can be rejected on structural evidence: the first one has double alliteration and two *Satzpartikeln*, while the second has single alliteration and three *Satzpartikeln*.<sup>32</sup>

In her criticism of alliterating finite verbs in clause-initial a-verses, Momma focuses on different syntactic behaviours between Bliss's binary classification of auxiliaries (and quasi-auxiliaries) and non-auxiliaries. She collects instances in which the finite verb (auxiliary and non-auxiliary) precedes a pronominal *Satzpartikeln* or follows it. The result is that “the greater the semantic significance of the verb, the stronger its tendency to precede pronominal *Satzpartikeln*,” by contrast, “those verbs that have the strongest tendency to follow pronominal *Satzpartikeln* have the least semantic significance”.<sup>33</sup>

Momma infers that this difference, motivated by semantic significance, seems to have a pragmatic function. Non-auxiliaries that have relatively full semantic significance and tend to be confused with *Satzteile* are likely to be placed before pronominal *Satzpartikeln* so that they are less likely to be mistaken for *Satzteile*. However, auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries that have relatively little semantic significance can be placed not only before pronominal *Satzpartikeln* but also after them. This is because they are not likely to be mistaken for unstressed elements, even when following pronominal *Satzpartikeln*.<sup>34</sup>

Although Momma claims that modern metrists seem to fail in determining the metrical status of the finite verb in double alliterating clause-initial a-verses as stressed or unstressed,<sup>35</sup> the assumption of the pragmatic function is helpful to examine the finite verb in double alliterating verses.

## 5. The Metrical Arrangement of Finite Verbs

I investigate the position of finite verbs placed in respective half-verses, and difference between lexical and grammatical verbs. Grammatical verbs are these grammaticalized verbs as auxiliaries, including *wesan*, *beon*, *habban*, *weorðan*, *motan*, *cunnan*, *magan*, *durran*, *sculan*, *þurfan*, *willan*;<sup>36</sup> and lexical verbs are other than them. Positions of finite verbs are classified into these four groups. For convenience of counting, metrical stress is added to the alliterated finite verbs:

1. first lift alliterated (stressed)

/ x x / x

*wēox* under *wolcnum* (*Beo* 8a)

[grew under sky]

2. second lift alliterated (stressed)

/ x x / x

*lēode* *gelēsten* (*Beo* 24a)

[people may serve]

3. second lift un-alliterated (stressed)

x x / / x

*þæt hīe* *ǣr* *drugon* (*Beo* 15a)

[that they formerly suffered]

4. dip

x x x x / / x

*Ne hȳrde* ic *cȳmlicor* (*Beo* 38a)

[Not heard I more finely]

Table 1 shows the numbers of lexical verbs of these groups in respective half-lines, and Table 2 shows that of grammatical verbs.<sup>37</sup>

Table 1. The Arrangement of Lexical Verbs in *Beowulf*

a-verse	all	double alliteration	b-verse	all <sup>38</sup>
1a	225	211	1b	66
2a	139	138	2b	0
3a	89	0	3b	1148
4a	155	— <sup>39</sup>	4b	154

Table 2. The Arrangement of Grammatical Verbs in *Beowulf*

a-verse	all	double alliteration	b-verse	all
1a	8	7	1b	3
2a	3	3	2b	0
3a	18	0	3b	264
4a	10	—	4b	98

In these a-verses, the overall finite verbs tend to be placed in the position of group 1a at a relatively high ratio (27%). On the other hand, most verbs are placed in the position of group 3b in these b-verses (81%). The ration of group 3b is obviously higher than other groups in both half-verses (55%). Therefore, this fact suggests that finite verbs are normally placed in the position displaced from where *Satzpartikeln* originally should be. They take metrical stresses but no alliteration in the b-verse. Comparing the total number of group 2a and 3a in both Tables, it becomes clear that these displaced finite verbs in a-verses tend to participate in alliteration. The ration of the overall finite verbs participating in double alliteration is 93% in group 1a and 99% in group 2a. These thirteen instances of single alliteration in group 1a are placed *þā*, *þæt* and adverbs in these second lifts. The only instance of single alliteration in group 2a is ambiguous whether *man* should bear metrical stress:

Mē man *sægde* (*Beo* 1175a)

[To me man (one) said]

This instance will be Sievers's Type A3 if *man* is used as an indefinite pronoun. Type 3 is not rare, and there are 68 instances that finite verbs are placed in the only lift of this rhythmic type.

There can be seen difference between lexical and grammatical verbs. Both lexical and grammatical verbs are prone to be placed in group 3b in these b-verses. Nevertheless in these a-verses, most grammatical verbs are placed in the position of group 4a (43%). Moreover, the number of group 2a is much less than 3a that means they do not tend to participate in alliteration than that of lexical verbs.

## 6. Conclusion

Finite verbs, as *Satzpartikeln* classified by Kuhn, are normally placed in the first dip of the clause, in the place that is either before the clause's first or second stressed word with *Satzteilpartikeln*. They do bear metrical stress when they are displaced from these positions. In *Beowulf*, most finite verbs are displaced from their original position to these positions in b-verses with no alliteration. On the other hand, in a-verses, these displaced finite verbs tend to participate in alliteration. However, this is a fact that can only be said for lexical verbs; grammatical verbs do not tend to participate in alliteration than that of lexical verbs. Since the position where it is likely to place differs depending on the sort of verbs, it seems necessary to subdivide these verbs, however I would like to verify it in the future.

## NOTES

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- 1 H. Kuhn. 1933. "Zur Wortstellung und –betonung im Altgermanischen." *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 57: 1-109, 5.
- 2 Ibid. 5.
- 3 Ibid. 8-9.
- 4 Jun Terasawa, 2011. *Old English Metre: An Introduction*. Toronto University Press, 28.
- 5 “/” stands for a stressed syllable; “x” stands for the unstressed syllable.
- 6 Hereinafter, *Beowulf* is abbreviated as *Beo*. In this paper, all quotations from *Beowulf* are from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds. 2008. *Klaeber's Beowulf and the*

- Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed., Toronto University Press, Print. All translations are mine.
- 7 Geoffrey Russom. 1997. "Purely Metrical Replacements for Kuhn's Laws." *English Historical Metrics*, ed. C. B. McCully and J. J. Anderson. Cambridge UP, 30-41, 1996. Momma Haruko. *The Composition of Old English Poetry*. Cambridge UP, 1997. Daniel Donoghue. "Language Matters." *Reading Old Texts*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe. Cambridge UP, 59-78, 5.
- 8 "A" stands for an alliterated lift, "X" and "Y" for un-alliterated lifts and boldfaced letters for alliterated sounds.
- 9 Fulk, Bjork and Niles 335.
- 10 Geoffrey Russom. 1987. *Old English Meter and Linguistic Theory*. Cambridge UP, 71. Terasawa 20.
- 11 Terasawa 20-21.
- 12 Fujiwara, Yasuaki. 1990. *Koeshi Inritsu Kenkyu* [Studies in Old English Metrics]. Hiroshima: Keisuisha, [In Japanese], 231.
- 13 Terasawa 18.
- 14 Bliss 23.
- 15 Eduard Sievers. 1885. "Zur Rhythmik des germanischen Alliterationsverses." *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 10: 209-314, 451-545; 1893. *Altgermanische Metrik*. Max Niemeyer.
- 16 A. J. Bliss. 1967. *The Metre of Beowulf*, revised ed., Blackwell.
- 17 *Ibid.* 23. He does not count the verb "to be" among these auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries.
- 18 *Ibid.* 10.
- 19 *Ibid.* 11. *Beowulf* 518a for *hæfde*, 3096a for *bæd*.
- 20 *Ibid.* 10-11. He counts 65 examples of the group (1), which all bear stress and alliterate, out of 33 examples of the group (2) in which 31 alliterate.
- 21 *Ibid.* 14. *Beowulf* 1600a for *com*, 1727b for *ah*. Bliss counts 75 examples of the group (4).
- 22 *Ibid.* 19.
- 23 *Ibid.* 12. He interprets some auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries as making accidental alliteration because the proportion of their alliteration is too small (17.6%) (Bliss 21-3).
- 24 *Ibid.* 12. He counts 83 examples of the group (3), the finite verb alliterates in 64.
- 25 *Ibid.* 14. He counts 105 examples of the group (5), the finite verb alliterates in 57.
- 26 *Ibid.* 15. He quotes Kuhn (9): "if there are several particles, they must not be distributed between both the possible positions [i.e. before and after the first stressed element]; nor may they be placed before the second stressed element if the first is preceded by a proclitic [*Satzteilpartikeln*] or an unstressed prefix."
- 27 *Ibid.* 15-17. In group (5), he treats the particle *þa* as a stressed element while the finite verb in the same verse containing *þa* is not stressed.

- 28 Ibid. 18. He counts nine examples in the group (6), in six of which the finite verb alliterates.  
29 *Beowulf* 731a for *mynte* (*Metre of Beowulf* 19).  
30 *Beowulf* 2252b for *nah* (*Metre of Beowulf* 19).  
31 Ibid. 20. He counts ten examples in the group (9); the finite verb alliterates in seven, and the  
instances of non-functional alliteration are five (338a, 442a, 2057a, 2172a, 2430a).  
32 “/” stands for a stressed syllable; “x” stands for the unstressed syllable. Underlining signifies  
alliteration. See Momma Haruko. 1996. “Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs in  
Clause-Initial a-verse: ‘Some Doubts and No Conclusions.’” *Studies in English Language  
and Literature*. “*Doubt Wisel*”; *Papers in Honour of E.G. Stanley*. Eds. M.J. Toswell and  
E.M. Tyler, London and New York: Routledge, 186-98, 187.  
33 Momma, “Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs” 187. Unlike Bliss, Momma indicates  
that auxiliaries and quasi-auxiliaries show the tendency to occur as metrically unstressed  
elements to different degrees.  
34 Momma, “Metrical Stress on Alliterating Finite Verbs” 191-92.  
35 Ibid. 194.  
36 Michael Getty. 1997. “Was Finite Verb Placement in Germanic Prosodically Conditioned?:  
Evidence from *Beowulf* and *Heliand*” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol.  
96, 155-181, 161.  
37 The letter “a” represents the group in a-verse, “b” for b-verse.  
38 Pattern [AX : YA] does not exist in *Beowulf*, see section two.  
39 The number of double alliteration does not concern finite verbs of Group 4a.