

Language Tests for the Identification of Middle English Genre¹

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1. Preliminaries

The linguistic ‘identity’ of a text comprises properties such as codicological setting, dialect features, vocabulary, metre, rhyme and alliteration, in the case of poetic compositions; such properties are essential to the characterization of any surviving document. That philological foundation is the gateway to literary interpretations and evaluations of the poet’s narrative skills, artistry, and originality. A good grasp of the bidirectional interaction of the linguistic and the literary facets of the material has the potential of being mutually informative. The selection of specific language forms for specific literary forms can be used both for charting and testing linguistic change, and for charting and testing literary history. This project explores some possible links between the prosodic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of Middle English romance texts and our assumptions about the genre’s intended audience. The goal of the study is to formulate some new research questions and to outline a research methodology to address these questions; it seeks to identify new ways of quantifying and interpreting the accommodation of linguistic features in verse and thereby to enrich the repertoire of tests that help us uncover and contextualize historical language use.

The choice of verse texts for this study should be no surprise: this volume is focused on the history of medieval romance, and verse was the natural vehicle

¹ The approach to *genre* in this study is strictly traditional. I follow Amy J. Devitt’s broad definition: ‘Genres exist [...] in the sense that they are patternings from repeated actions according to which (or in reaction against which) readers and writers use language’, in ‘Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre’, *College English* 62 (2000), 696–718, at p. 702. For a pilot study of how different genres are affected differently by linguistic change, see Devitt, ‘Genre as Textual Variable: Some Historical Evidence from Scots and American English’, *American Speech* 64 (1989), 291–303.

of romance composition and transmission until practically the end of what we think of as 'Middle' English. Moreover, verse texts are always a fertile testing ground for linguistic reconstruction. In verse, we count syllables, their relative prominence, their prosodic weight, and their arrangement in units or metrical feet. All of these elements are recursive and quantifiable; their *controlled* recursiveness distinguishes verse metre from the natural rhythm of speech.

The linguistic competence of the poet is the raw material for verse; linguistic competence implies also awareness of ubiquitous variation and different levels of formality associated with different discourse modes. The ways in which that awareness is manifested in the metre of a particular verse form are therefore a useful heuristic for the poet's, or the copyist's, intuitions and responses to the nature and the destination of a composition. With this premise in mind, we can ask whether the composers and copyists of Middle English romances make metrical and stylistic choices that can be considered genre-specific.

This study draws its new data from two well-known romances, both copied by Scribe 1 of the Auchinleck manuscript: *The King of Tars* and *Sir Orfeo*. The first linguistic feature investigated in Section 2 is the status of phrasal prominence within the noun phrase. Section 3 turns to a related topic: the possible link between semantic weight, frequency, and the prosodic prominence of attributive adjectives in these romances. Section 4 adumbrates an additional line of diachronic investigation: the attributive vs. predicative use of adjectives as possibly promising tests for genre. The results are summarized in Section 5.

2. Phrasal stress in Middle English: continuity or innovation?

2.1. *The Nuclear Stress Rule in Present-Day English*

The first linguistic property tested as a potential diagnostic for genre-specific usage is the placement of adjective-noun phrases in the verse line. Rising prominence within syntactic phrases is a common, though not invariant pattern across languages. In Present-Day English (PDE) this pattern is known as the Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR):

- (1) *Nuclear Stress Rule* (NSR): The rightmost member of a phrase is strongest.²
NSR: *stay cóol, get sét, three-tén, call hóme, nice dréss*

² The wording is from Bruce Hayes, *Metrical Stress Theory: Principles and Case Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 368. The term originates with Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, *The Sound Pattern of English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 16. See also Liberman and Prince, 'On Stress and Linguistic Rhythm', *Linguistic Inquiry* 8 (1977), 249–336, at p. 257, who note: 'In any pair of sister nodes [AB]

Establishing phrasal prominence relations in living languages is hard because the basic principle of rightward prominence can be overridden by independent syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic considerations, but the general definition in (1) serves well as a starting point. In what follows, the NSR manifestations will be examined for a very narrowly defined subset: adjective-noun phrases of the type *nice dréss*. If the *default* prosodic pattern of such phrases is rising, the expectation is that poets would tend to place the head of the phrase, the noun, in a strong/ictic metrical position, while the subordinate adjective will be placed in a weak or non-ictic position. Even though prominence reversal can be quite common in poetic texts, Joseph C. Beaver found that ‘in a random sampling from some dozen poets (nine of them British) in seven or eight different periods, occurrences of adj-noun with back-to-back stress are well over twice as frequent in the weak-strong configuration, a fact which would tend to support operation of nuclear stress assignment’.³ Similarly, Marina Tarlinskaja found that throughout the history of English verse the expected correspondences between phrasal prosodic prominence (NSR) and ictus do not fall below 60 per cent, and they exceed that figure most of the time.⁴ The examples in (2) illustrate the expected distribution:

(2)	Monosyllabic adjectives in Shakespeare’s <i>Sonnets</i> ⁵	
	<i>And with old wóes new wáil my dear time’s waste</i>	30
	<i>If the dull súbstance of my flesh were thought</i>	44
	<i>To leap large léngths of miles when thou art gone</i>	44
	<i>I think good thóughts, whilst others write good wórds</i>	85
	<i>Take heed, dear hart, of this large prívilege</i>	95
	<i>And beautie making beautifull old ríme</i>	106
	<i>In the old áge black was not counted faire</i>	127

X, where X is a phrasal category, B is strong.’ For the greater stability of phrasal stress compared to compound stress, see Liberman and Sproat, ‘The Stress and Structure of Modified Noun Phrases in English’, in *Lexical Matters*, ed. I. A. Sag and A. Scabolesi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 131–81; and Heinz Giegerich, ‘Compound or Phrase? English Noun-Plus-Noun Constructions and the Stress Criterion’, *ELL* 8 (2004), 1–24. Early discussion of the interplay of speech prosody and metrical placement of adjective-noun phrases in English poetry appears in Joseph C. Beaver, ‘The Rules of Stress in English Verse’, *Language* 47 (1971), 586–614; and Paul Kiparsky, ‘Stress, Syntax, and Meter’, *Language* 51 (1975), 576–616.

³ Beaver, ‘The Rules of Stress in English Verse’, p. 592.

⁴ Marina Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare’s Verse: Iambic Pentameter and the Poet’s Idiosyncrasies* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); and Marina Tarlinskaja, ‘General and Particular Aspects of Meter’, in *Phonetics and Phonology*, ed. Paul Kiparsky and Gilbert Youmans (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989), I: *Rhythm and Meter*, pp. 121–54.

⁵ See also Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare’s Verse*, pp. 32–9; Tarlinskaja, ‘General and Particular Aspects of Meter’; Marina Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama, 1561–1642* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 19–22.

Such findings support a hypothesis that in poetry composed in regular stress-alternating metre the poets tend to respect speech rhythm and match the peaks of stress to the beats of the verse line.

2.2. Adjective-noun prosodic contour in Old English

The historical depth of the adjective-noun phrase prosodic contour in English is a vexed issue, so before getting into the Middle English attestations, we need to clarify the diachronic input. In the absence of synchronic commentary, the placement of the components in verse is our only source of potentially useful data, yet the interpretation of these data is far from straightforward. The ‘usual’ pattern of alliteration in adjective-noun phrases in Old English verse is linear: in a string of adjectives, nouns, and non-finite verbs, it is the first element that has to alliterate, but not to the exclusion of the second element. Thus: *lange hwile* ‘a long time’⁶ alliterates on [l-], and *ond seo deorce niht* ‘and the dark night’⁷ and *ofer deop wæter* ‘over deep water’⁸ alliterate on [d-]. C. B. McCully and R. M. Hogg interpreted the occurrence of alliteration on the adjective as evidence that Old English lacked right-prominent phrasal contour, specifically in noun phrases; therefore the Nuclear Stress Rule could not be projected back to Old English.⁹ The implication of that position is that phrasal right prominence was a post-Old English innovation. D. Minkova and R. Stockwell tested the claim in the matching of adjective-noun phrases to metrical positions in Old English verse and argued that the obligatory alliteration on the first/left-hand item in such phrases is a *metrical* artifice, which overrides and obscures the ‘natural’ rhythm of speech.¹⁰ This can be shown in lines where the syntactic order is inverted to give prominence to the noun:

- (3) Inversion NP + adj. as a stylistic choice in OE:
- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| þæt wæs wræc <i>micel</i> / wine Scyldinga | <i>Beo</i> 170 |
| þa wæs wundor <i>micel</i> / þæt se winsele | <i>Beo</i> 771 |
| oppæt hrefn <i>blaca</i> / heofones wynne | <i>Beo</i> 1801 |
| se þe him wines <i>glæd</i> / wilna bruceð | <i>JDay</i> 78 |
| þrea wæron þearle, / þegnas <i>grimme</i> | <i>Guthlac</i> AB 547 |
| on þam campstede / cyningas <i>giunge</i> | <i>Brun</i> 29 |

There are some additional details not previously considered in this context. First, in a structure of single attributive adjective + noun, the default

⁶ *Beowulf*, 16a. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ *Phoenix*, 98b.

⁸ *Genesis A*, 2876b.

⁹ Christopher B. McCully and Richard M. Hogg, ‘Dialect Variation and Historical Metrics’, *Diachronica* 11 (1994), 13–34.

¹⁰ Donka Minkova and Robert Stockwell, ‘Against the Emergence of the Nuclear Stress Rule in Middle English’, in *Studies in Middle English Linguistics*, ed. Jacek Fisiak (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 301–34.

arrangement in Old English prose is the same as in Present-Day English, e.g. the adjective precedes the head noun;¹¹ inversions are found almost exclusively in the verse.¹² This substantiates the argument that the remarkably high rate of noun-adjective inversion in verse is driven by the requirements of alliteration. If the parametrical rules of alliteration trump the norms of syntax, that those rules also trump the norms of phrasal prosody becomes more plausible.

A second consideration comes from within the poetic corpus. B. Rand Hutcheson gathered statistical information on the distribution of alliteration in adjective-noun phrases which is quite revealing.¹³ He separated verse subtypes depending on the syntactic composition of the string in the relevant verse type. Type A is by far the most frequent verse type in the corpus (47 per cent of the on-verses and 39 per cent of the off-verses are Type A).¹⁴ Within that group, the most common pattern is the basic pattern S w S w, as in *lange hwile* (*Beo* 16a), no resolution, no secondary stress. One very robustly represented group is A1b: adjective + noun – there are 719 verses of this subtype.¹⁵ Fifty-seven per cent of these are in the b-verse, which is the one part of the long line in Old English that disallows double alliteration, e.g. *sincfāge sel / sweartum nihtum* ‘jewelled hall / in black nights’ (*Beo* 167); on *bearm nacan / beorhte frætwe* ‘into bosom of ship / bright trappings’ (*Beo* 214). Given the metrical linear precedence rule for alliteration, we cannot construe this distribution as proof of the prosodic relations within the noun phrase in the spoken language. Moreover, the rest of the data for the adjective-noun attestations of A1b-type on-verses shows that there is a significant body of on-verses with double alliteration: 117, or 16.4 per cent, of this subset are of the type *sīdra sorga* ‘spacious sorrows’ (*Beo* 149a), *grimre gūde* ‘grim warfare’ (*Beo* 527a), *neowle næssas* ‘towering crags’ (*Beo* 1411). Double alliteration is uninformative as to the prosodic relations in the phrase; it would be unreasonable to use these attestations as evidence *against* the reconstruction of rising phrasal prominence in speech. This leaves 191, or 26.5 per cent of the total A1b data,

¹¹ Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), I: *Concord, the Parts of Speech and the Sentence*, pp. 75–80.

¹² In *Old English Syntax*, p. 75, Mitchell comments on the frequency of inversions (noun-adjective) in poetry, but does not give specifics. It is notable that David L. Shores found no single post-positioned adjectival modifier in the *Peterborough Chronicle* 1122–54 in *A Descriptive Syntax of the Peterborough Chronicle from 1122–1154* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971), pp. 159–61; this excludes genitives, prepositional phrases, etc. Moreover, in OE verse, *mycel* is placed after the noun in the great majority of cases, unlike other adjectives such as *leoht*, *beorht*, *grim*, and *wis*, which resist the inversion. This point is relevant to the discussion of semantic weight in Section 3.

¹³ Bellenden Rand Hutcheson, *Old English Poetic Metre* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995).

¹⁴ Hutcheson, *Old English Poetic Metre*, p. 297.

¹⁵ The total and the percentages are calculated from the basic numbers in Hutcheson, *Old English Poetic Metre*, p. 287.

where there is single alliteration in on-verse adjective-noun phrases. In view of the conservative nature of OE verse we can hardly claim that the evidence of alliteration in the verse makes a good case against the NSR in Old English.¹⁶

2.3 Testing adjective-noun prosody in Middle English

Turning to Middle English, if we start with the assumption that the preference for rising prominence within a simple noun phrase was a feature of the spoken language, we can inquire whether that prosodic contour influences the placement of the phrase elements in the verse line. Further, we can ask whether the degree to which the prosodic contour of basic NP phrases carries over to ‘popular’ verse could be associated with the secular nature of romances, their narrative tone, and presumably broader audience. The examples in (4) illustrate the pattern one would expect if we project the rule back to Middle English:

- (4) Projecting the NSR back to Middle English:¹⁷
- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Gret íóie þai hadde, wiþouten les | <i>King of Tars</i> 310 |
| Þe sóudan, wiþ gode wille anón | <i>King of Tars</i> 922 |
| Þan was king Memaroc in gret péyn | <i>King of Tars</i> 1189 |
| In sómer he liveth bí wild frút | <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 257 |
| To hére his glé he háth gode wille | <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 444 |
| That him was só hard gráce y-yarked | <i>Sir Orfeo</i> 347 |

Compare:

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| For with good hópe he gán fully assénte | <i>Tr</i> I 391 |
| Gret hónour did hem Deiphebus, certeyn | <i>Tr</i> II 1569 |

¹⁶ It is also of interest that even in the iambic verse of much later vintage when poets resort to alliteration in monosyllabic adjective-noun phrases, it is the adjective that is marked by alliteration. Moreover, the rate of alliteration on the adjectives in Shakespeare’s poem *The Rape of Lucrece* is ‘almost three times higher’ than in his history play *Richard II*, as noted by Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare’s Verse*, p. 289.

¹⁷ I have used Judith Perryman’s 1980 edition of *The King of Tars*, in *Advocates 19.2.1*, Middle English Texts 12 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter), checked against the 1988 online edition based on F. Krause, ‘Kleine Publikationen aus der Auchinleck-hs: IX, *The King of Tars*’, *Englische Studien* 11 (1888), 33–62, Vernon and Auchinleck MSS in parallel with variants from Simeon. The date of the Auchinleck version is c. 1310–30 and its provenance is London or the South Midlands; see Rhiannon Purdie, *Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 208. (Online: *Manual I*, 130; 289. *Index 1108*; http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:po:Z200435624:2). The citations from *Sir Orfeo* are from Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays>, checked against A. J. Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1966). The Chaucer citations are from Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1986).

The first text for which data were gathered was *The King of Tars*.¹⁸ Although traditionally characterized as a romance, the centrality of the religious theme in *The King of Tars* has prompted classification in the sub-category of ‘homiletic romances’,¹⁹ or ‘popular didactic romance’. Pious edification notwithstanding, it fits other characteristics of romances; see Pearsall, Reichl, and Purdie,²⁰ who point out the formal affiliations of the text, with a large group of romances exhibiting ‘an unmistakable stylistic uniformity, which reveals their roots in popular story-telling’.²¹ The poem is written in ‘close adherence to classical tail-rhyme techniques’.²² The stanzas follow a demanding $aa^4b^3aa^4b^3cc^4b^3dd^4b^3$ rhyming formula:

(5) The metre of *The King of Tars*:

	Rhyme	Beats
	a	4
	a	4
	b	3
	a	4
5	a	4
	b	3
	c	4
	c	4
	b	3
10	d	4
	d	4
	b	3

The rhythm of the lines is predominantly iambic. The syllabic count ranges between seven and nine syllables per line for the four-beat lines and between five and seven for the three-beat lines.²³ The scansion follows the normal practice of controlling for pre-vocalic elision, where ‘pre-vocalic’ includes

¹⁸ *The King of Tars* was one of the texts analysed for the use of infinitival forms in Donka Minkova and Emily Runde, ‘Genre, Audience, and Scribal Adaptation to Language Change: The Case of Infinitival Marking’, in *Essays and Studies in Middle English*, ed. Jacek Fisiak, Magdalena Bator and Marta Sylwanowicz (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 95–120, where we offer more extensive text descriptions and scansion details.

¹⁹ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the 13th and 14th Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

²⁰ Derek Pearsall, ‘The Development of Middle English Romance’, in *Studies in Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches*, ed. Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 11–37; Karl Reichl, ‘*The King of Tars*: Language and Textual Tradition’, in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 171–86; Purdie, *Anglicising Romance*, p. 95.

²¹ Reichl, ‘*The King of Tars*’, p. 172.

²² Pearsall, ‘The Development of Middle English Romance’, p. 29.

²³ Nine syllables for the four-beat lines and seven syllables for the three-beat lines involve counting the line-final <-e>s as extrametrical unstressed syllables. Seven syllables for

pronominal initial <h->. Combing through the text, I analysed the placement of all relevant adjectives. The overall numbers of relevant attestations are quite low, because of numerous exclusions, recorded in (6):

- (6) Data-base exclusions:
- (a) Determiners: *this, sum, each, min, his*²⁴
- | | |
|---|------|
| For in him is <i>mine</i> hópe, apliȝt | 757 |
| He schúld forlés(s)e þát <i>ich</i> dáy | 1223 |
| Ín <i>al</i> máner wíse (3-stress, l. 915) rhymes with ... <i>arise</i> ²⁵ | |
- (b) Disyllabic adjectives: *heþen, gentil, wicked, miri, hali, Cristen, fairer, better*
- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Sche lerd þe <i>heþen</i> lawe | 501 |
| & <i>duhti</i> men on hors to ride | 517 |
- (c) Grammatical (weak declension and/or plural/feminine) final –e
- | | |
|--|-----|
| Bot sche wil wiþ hir <i>gode</i> wille | 46 |
| A <i>riche</i> bed þer was ydiȝt | 401 |
| Bifor þe <i>heyȝe</i> lordinges alle | 389 |
| þe soudan made a <i>riche</i> fest | 143 |

the four-beat lines and five syllables for the three-beat lines are headless, e.g. l. 32: *Hé wald hir win in batáyl*; l. 117: *Bóþe lést & mast*; 771: *As y zou tel may*.

²⁴ The exclusion here applies to demonstratives, quantifiers, possessives, though what should be included under the cover term ‘determiner’ can be debated, and not all items under this rubric are equally weak. Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 354ff, 538ff, define determiners in terms of function within the NP, which could potentially include ‘regular’ adjectives. Their terminology distinguishes between adjectives and *determinatives*, and it is acknowledged that the criteria for determinatives are not absolute, so that, for example, *many, few, much, little* ‘bear a considerable resemblance to adjectives’ (p. 539). ‘Commentary on the LAEME Grammels in *LAEME: A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English, 1150–1325*, Version 3.2’, compiled by Margaret Laing (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh), <http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/laeme2/laeme2.html>, treats the following as either adjectives or pronouns: *any, both, each, eachone, either, evereach, fela, few, geon, geond, hwo:n, n+any, neither, other, self, some, such, what, whether, which*; I have used this list as a basic guideline for exclusions, adding *all* to the list; see also Ad Putter, ‘A Prototype Theory of Metrical Stress: Lexical Categories and Ictus in Langland, the Gawain-Poet and Other Alliterative Poets’, in *The Use and Development of Middle English*, ed. Richard Dance and Laura Wright (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 281–98, at p. 281. The function and status of these words is subject to diachronic change; see the discussion of, for example, *other* in Tine Breban, ‘Structural Persistence: A Case Based on the Grammaticalization of English Adjectives of Difference’, *ELL* 13 (2009), 77–96.

²⁵ Line 915 is the only relevant example with *all* and it is predictably placed in a weak metrical position. In *Sir Orfeo* all six relevant attestations of *all* are in weak positions. On the special status of quantifiers see Putter, ‘A Prototype Theory of Metrical Stress’, pp. 285–7. Putter shows convincingly that in the alliterative verse the nature of the adjective, its ranking in a scale of ‘lexicality’, is a major factor in determining whether it should be assigned higher prominence than the adjacent noun – they should be evaluated with respect to each other; see also the discussion at the end of Section 3.

Language Tests

(d) Predicative uses:		
Wel <i>stout & strong</i> þai were	1077	
(e) Post-positioned adjective		
Wiþ kniȝtes <i>fele & stedes stiþe</i>	350	
Wiþ browes <i>brod & hore</i>	438	
(<i>Þe leuedi þonked God þat day.</i>)		
For ioie sche wepe wiþ eyzen <i>gray</i>	941	

All examples are from *The King of Tars*. (6a) excludes various sub-categories of determiners. Their predictable prosodic ‘weakness’ has been reflected in the verse from the earliest times.²⁶ Disyllabic adjectives, whether etymologically disyllabic, such as *heathen*, *gentle*, or morphologically complex items such as *Christian*, *fairer*, are also kept out of the picture: their placement in stress-alternating metre is not revealing.²⁷ (6c) covers adjectives in the grammatical frame of determiner + adj. + noun (an extension of the earlier ‘weak declension’ frame) and potential plurals that require disyllabic scansion. By common consent they are inflection-preserving, which goes hand-in-hand with rhythmic optimization.²⁸ I have also been careful to isolate cases where the final *e-* may signal gender, preceding a feminine noun like *feast*. All predicative uses, as in (6d), are also excluded. Finally, post-positioned adjectives are separated because they may have additional stylistic value: they foreground the noun, or, as in line 941, the word order is inverted to satisfy the rhyme scheme.

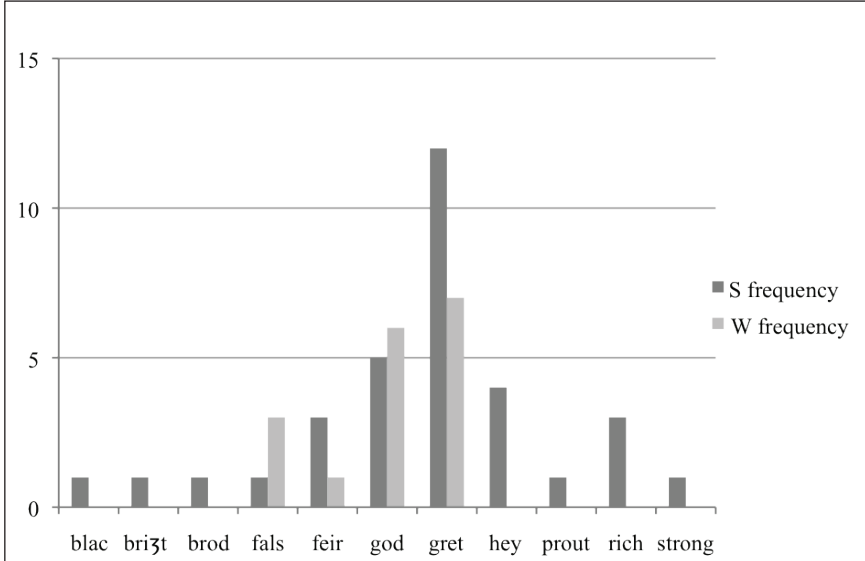
The findings: all monosyllabic adjectives can be positioned in strong metrical positions, as in (7a), but *not* all adjectives are found in weak positions, as in (7b). The results are shown in Graph 7.1.

²⁶ ‘Proclitics also are the adjectives of indefinite quantity: *fela, fēa, ænig, nænig, manig, sum, nān*, as may be seen by the manner in which they often stand before their noun in a metrical dip, or bearing a non-alliterating life: *ealles moncynnes* (Beow 1955a); *þær him nænig wæter* (id 1514a). The numerals, on the contrary, are fully stressed adjectives’, as noted by Alastair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: OUP, 1959), §96. The significance of the different semantic weight of the items in the NP will be addressed in Section 3.

²⁷ The flexibility of metrical placement of monosyllables allows a meaningful testing of the placement of monosyllables in the line, while disyllabic words are much more restricted in their position; see Kiparsky, ‘Stress, Syntax, and Meter’; and Paul Kiparsky, ‘The Rhythmic Structure of English Verse’, *Linguistic Inquiry* 8 (1977), 189–247. Except for *gentil*, an early loan (c. 1225), stressed initially in Chaucer and in alliterative verse, the disyllabic adjectives are native, and they are consistently positioned in ictus in this poem.

²⁸ Donka Minkova, *The History of Final Vowels in English* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), pp. 171–85.

- (7) Monosyllabic adjectives in *The King of Tars*²⁹
- (a) Wiþ **brīȝt** armour & **brōd** banér 158–9 (rhyme on *fer, ner*)
 & þat was **grét** pité 213 (rhymes with *fre, þre*)
 Alle þurch þi **fáls** biléue 591 (rhymes with *preue, aneue*)³⁰
- (b) **Gret** ióie þai hadde, wiþouten les 310
 Þai sett him on a fúl **gode** stéde 190



Graph 7.1 Monosyllabic adjectives in S(trong) and W(eak) metrical positions in *The King of Tars*

The placement of monosyllabic adjectives in strong positions can be attributed to two factors. First, if the adjective follows a prosodically weak/function word, and the head noun is disyllabic of the shape W S, as *unskille* in l. 735: *With wróng and grét unskille*, or l. 1081: *Do fif kinges of prout parayle*, the principle of stress alternation, both in speech, and in the metre, allows the monosyllabic adjective to occupy a strong position without incurring any violation. Another factor in the placement of the adjective in strong metrical position is the constraint operation at the end of the line, where the prominence on

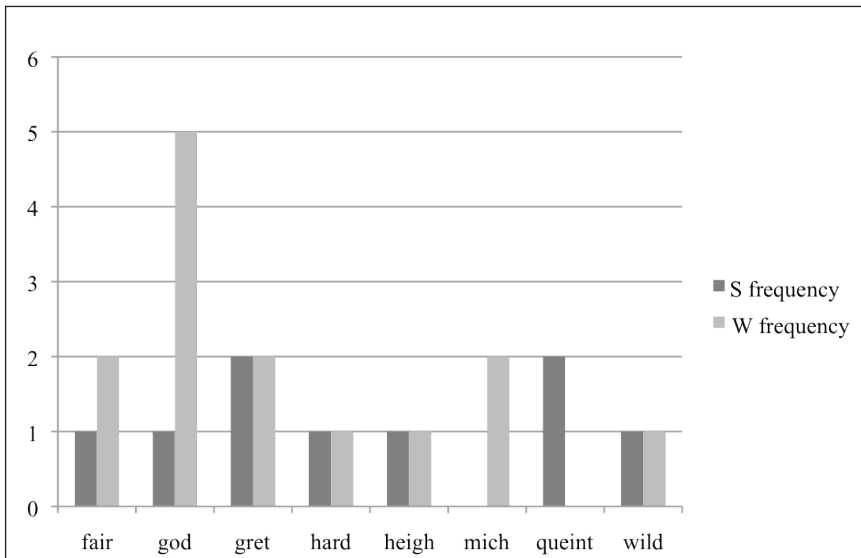
²⁹ The one example of weak *fair* is: 766–7: *De prest no leng nold abide, A feir vessel he tok þat tide* (vessel is AN, stressed initially in Chaucer).

³⁰ The weak uses of *fals* are only *fals law, fals lay*; compare (c. 1400) *Sowdone of Baby-lone* l. 764: *If he will Baptised be And lefe his fals laye*.

the rhyme position is inviolable, e.g. l. 5: & an hépen héve lording (rhyming with *king*).

Again, the exclusions in (6) lower the number of relevant attestations. It is nevertheless noticeable that instances such as l. 58, *Be máiden ánsweard wíp mild mód*, which conform to the NSR, are very rare outside the two most frequent adjectives *good* and *great*.

Sir Orfeo, another popular romance in the Auchinleck manuscript, is also attributed to Scribe 1. It is composed in short couplets. The predominant rhythm in the 604 lines is iambic.³¹ The lines are mostly octosyllabic four-beat lines, but occasional three-beat lines occur too, e.g. l. 193: *Wíp fairi forþ ynome*. In this text too the numbers are low, and not all of the items found in *The King of Tars* are used in *Sir Orfeo*. The adjective showing the most stable placement in weak position is *good*, an overlap with the data in Graph 7.1. In the instances where adjectives are placed in S the metrical constraints are the same as the ones noted for *The King of Tars*: l. 240: *Bot euer he liueþ in grét maláis*; l. 299: *In quéynt atíre gisely*.



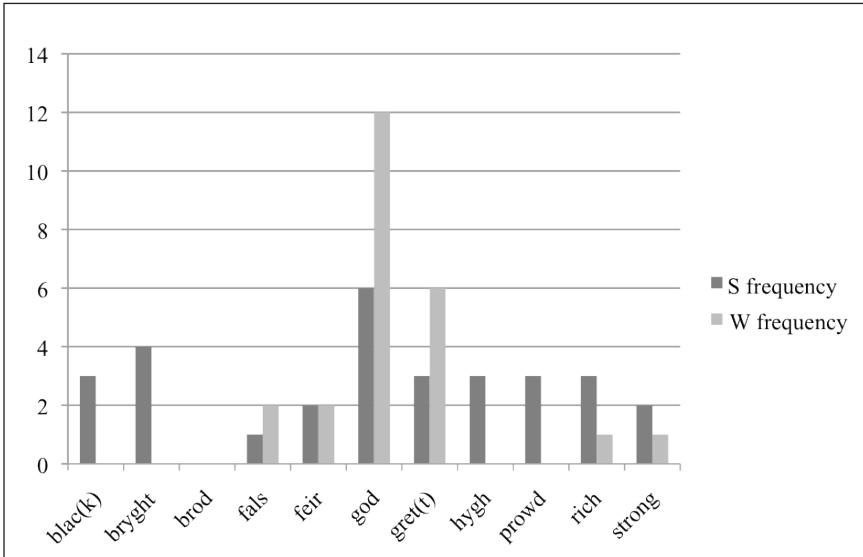
Graph 7.2 Monosyllabic adjectives in S and W metrical positions in *Sir Orfeo*

So the poet, and his Auchinleck Scribe 1, one of the ‘carpenters of Romance’,³² had a good ear for distinctions based both on the prosodic input

³¹ Bliss edition.

³² The phrase is cited in Reichl, ‘*The King of Tars*’.

from speech and on the requirements of metre. Stepping outside the Auchinleck and looking for attestations of the same attributive monosyllabic adjectives in other tail-rhyme romances confirms that the pattern identified for the romances copied by Scribe 1 is unexceptional. The results for all six romances concorded by Karl Reichl and Walter Sauer are shown in Graph 7.3.³³ It is obvious that there is no significant difference between the distributions of the relevant adjectives in these texts.



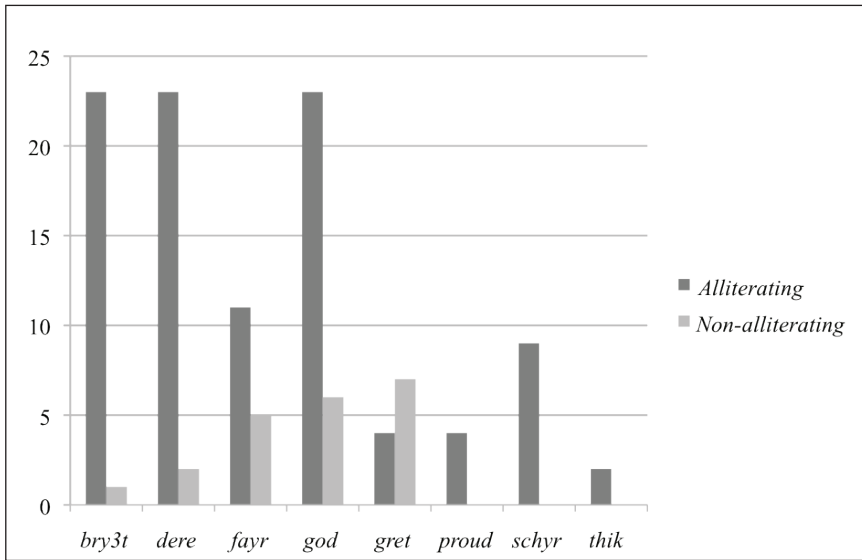
Graph 7.3 Monosyllabic adjectives in S and W positions in other tail-rhyme romances³⁴

The highly compatible distributions in texts associated with the romance genre are suggestive, but the statistics are insufficiently robust to be taken as a strongly positive linguistic correlate of ‘popular’ style. A comparison of the placements of the same adjectives in *Sir Gawain and the Great Knight* is shown in Graph 7.4.³⁵

³³ *A Concordance to Six Middle English Tail-Rhyme Romances*, ed. Karl Reichl and Walter Sauer, 2 vols (Bern: Peter Lang, 1993).

³⁴ The texts included in Reichl and Sauer’s *Concordance* are *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Octavian* (Northern version), *The King of Tars*, and *Sir Tryamowr*.

³⁵ Data from Barnet Kottler and Alan Markman, *Concordance to Five Middle English Poems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966).

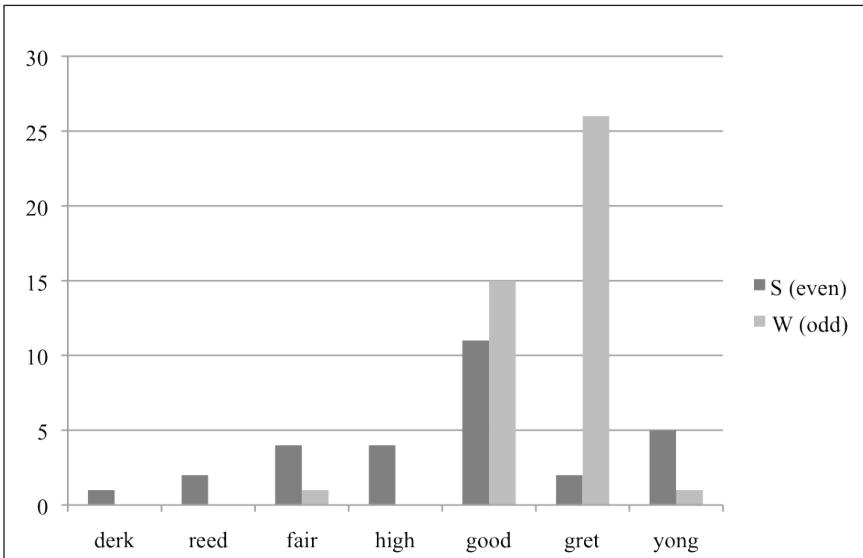


Graph 7.4 Adjectives in Adj. + N phrases in *SGGK*

Predictably, pre-nominal adjectives alliterate freely, but note also that the probability of non-alliterating use increases in accord with the frequency with which adjectives are placed in weak position in Graphs 7.1–7.3. Once again *good* and *great* are the most likely items to appear unstressed.

Finally, using the raw data in Appendix 3 in Minkova and Stockwell,³⁶ Graph 7.5 charts the distribution of a set of adjectives in the same syntactic frame in Chaucer.

³⁶ Minkova and Stockwell, ‘Against the Emergence of the Nuclear Stress Rule in Middle English’, pp. 329–34.



Graph 7.5 Adjectives in Adj. + N phrases in *The Romaunt of the Rose*

The distributions in all five graphs are equiprobable, with differences in attested tokens, but the types are less varied: the preponderance of *good* and *great* in weak positions is a common denominator. However, the question posed at the beginning of Section 2.3, whether conformity to the Nuclear Stress Rule is a good linguistic bridge to ‘orality’ of the composition and the ‘popularity’ of its consumption, remains open. The continuing presence of a final <-e> limits the number of types and tokens of testable monosyllabic items in the frame adjective + noun. It is likely that a more comprehensive search replicating the outlined methodology could yield robust results on which the NSR can be tested, but this work lies in the future.

3. Semantic content and lexical frequency

In speech, and even more in art verse, the novelty and expressivity of an adjective can obscure and override the unmarked rising prosodic contour within the noun phrase. Minkova and Stockwell argued that one of the statistically testable factors influencing the relative prominence of the modifier and the head in the noun phrase was the different degree of semantic expressivity of the modifier, as in (8), where adjectives of the type *great* are much more likely to fill a weak position in the line, while the adjectives as in (8b) appear regularly in ictus. A check of all relevant attestations of *blind*, *blue*, *deep*, *dark*, *fresh*, *high* in Chaucer yields no instances comparable to (8a).

Language Tests

- (8) Semantic load as a factor in Adj. N placement in ictus:³⁷
- (a) That is the man of so gret sápiencie Tr I 515
 But well I woot þat in this wórlð greet pýne ys KnT 1324
 Hym to grèt sháme and to grèt vileynýe MancT 260
- (b) And Nysus doughter song with fréssh entente Tr V 1110
 A whít còte and a bléw hòod wered he GP 564
 And for to drynken stróng wýn, reed as blood GP 635

The discussion of adjective-noun groups in Putter, Jefferson and Stokes shows the importance of the relative semantic weight of the two members of the phrase for alliterative verse.³⁸ The examples in (9) illustrate their observations:

- (9) Stress and beat in alliterative metre³⁹
- (a) With rych réuel orýzt and réchles mérþes SGGK 40
Rýche róbés ful rád rénkkez hym bróztén SGGK 862
- (b) I schal gif hym of my gýft þys gíserne ryche
 (Þis ax, þat is heue innogh, to hondele as hym lykes) SGGK 288–9
- (c) And al watz ráyled on réd ryche golde náylez SGGK 603

In (9a) the adjective *rich* is metrically subordinate to *reuel*, *robés*, as one would expect from the application of the Nuclear Stress Rule; under this scansion the relevant ‘extended’ a-verses become regular two-beat verses. In (9b) the inversion of *ryche* highlights the novelty of the noun, the ‘heavy axe’ apparently needed as a gloss in the next line. The adjective is prosodically subordinate and does not alliterate, but attracts the beat as the last word of the line. In (9c) the rhythm rule (the tendency for the second of a series of three adjacent content words to receive weaker stress, as in a ‘héavy round stóne’) subordinates the adjective ‘golde’. Putter and Jefferson calculate that about 65 percent of their adjective-noun data alliterate on the noun.⁴⁰ They find that ‘the needs of alliteration will not normally coerce adjectives into unaccented position unless semantic factors ... or rhythmical tendencies (such as the rhythm rule) cooperate’.⁴¹

Similarly, Tarlinskaja has argued in favour of attending to semantic factors in matching prominences in verse.⁴² Although, as noted in (2), the NSR

³⁷ The examples in (8a) are *not* from Minkova and Stockwell, ‘Against the Emergence of the Nuclear Stress Rule in Middle English’.

³⁸ Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson and Myra Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse* (Oxford: Medium Aevum, 2007), pp. 196–216.

³⁹ For a full coverage see Putter et al., *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse*, chapter 4. Chapter 4 is cited here as Jefferson and Putter, following the statement in Putter et al., p. vii.

⁴⁰ Putter and Jefferson, p. 211.

⁴¹ Putter and Jefferson, p. 168.

⁴² See Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare’s Verse*; Tarlinskaja, ‘General and Particular Aspects of Meter’; Tarlinskaja, *Shakespeare and the Versification of English Drama*, pp. 19–22.

is generally observed, semantic factors are likely to interfere. In (10) *good thoughts* and *good words* are rising cadences, iambs, the adjective is in weak metrical position, while *sád slave* is left-prominent:

(10) Monosyllabic adjectives in Shakespeare

I think good thoughts, whilst others write good wórdz *Sonnet 85*

But, like a sád sláve, stay and think of nought *Sonnet 57*

Such studies bring new evidence to bear on the organization and the strictness of the metrical template. The additional semantic considerations are compatible with a reconstruction of continuous NSR in English. Likewise, the overview of the adjectival placement in Graphs 7.1–7.5 reveals one steady correlation: adjectives placed in weak positions are also semantically weak, reaffirming the conclusions based on alliterative verse and iambic pentameter. The results for the romances in Section 2 cannot yield definitive conclusions about the stress-alternating patterns in these compositions, but they do suggest another angle of inquiry that helps us uncover usage-related patterns that characterize the texts' proximity to the spoken language. This angle is lexical frequency in relation to the findings on metrical placement. It is known that lexical frequency interacts bidirectionally with the semantic force of an item: 'Frequency of use leads to weakening of semantic force by habituation.'⁴³ Frequent lexical items undergo semantic bleaching and are less likely to convey new and important information that would attract prosodic prominence. Conversely, rare words command more attention, and they are unlikely to undergo reduction and prosodic subordination.

As the correlation between the semantic and pragmatic weight of an item in verse and its lexical frequency could be of relevance in identifying textual properties, Table 7.1 shows the frequency and ranking of the adjectives found and charted in Graphs 7.1–7.5 from Old English to Present-Day English.⁴⁴

⁴³ Joan Bybee, *Frequency of Use and the Organization of Language* (New York: OUP, 2007), p. 338.

⁴⁴ Two items found in Graphs 7.1–7.5 are not included: *proud* and *rich*, because of the etymological connection with Old French. Headword entries in the online *DOE* are currently (as of June 2018) only available from A to G: <https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/>. For *hard*, *high*, *strong*, *wild*, I used the Old English Corpus Variant Word/Phrase Search: <http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/help/aboutdoeonlineindex.html>. The ME counts are from *LAEME* Version 3.2. For PDE the rankings are from *COCA*, the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*: <http://www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp>.

Table 7.1 Frequency ranking for some common monosyllabic adjectives

<i>OE adjective</i>	<i>OE freq.</i>	<i>OE rank</i>	<i>LAEME counts</i>	<i>PDE gloss</i>	<i>COCA freq.</i>
gōd	2,500	14	1,578 (1)	good	386,236 (1)
geong	900		240 (7)	young	173,683 (4)
fæger	450		584 (3)	fair	30,013 (11)
beorht	450	208	243 (6)	bright	32,290 (9)
heah	300	174	516 (4)	high	277,214 (2)
brād	275		63 (12)	broad	29,419 (12)
strang	230		433 (5)	strong	90,550 (7)
blæc	150		77 (11)	black	161,425 (5)
grēat	150	61	619 (2)	great	244,358 (3)
dýre	140		209 (9)	dear	9,877 (13)
heard	140		212 (8)	hard	94,488 (6)
wilde	120		136 (10)	wild	31,900 (10)
deorc	80		13 (13)	dark	51,653 (8)

The adjectives examined and included in the graphs in Section 2 are arranged in descending order of frequency in the *Dictionary of Old English* (DOE). The first column shows the Old English (OE) base forms as headword entries; the numbers to the left of the OE headwords are the OE frequency ranking. The second column shows the full counts of all adjectival forms in the DOE corpus. The third compares the DOE data to the few available relevant rankings in Barney,⁴⁵ based on 2,000 words of all classes found in the poetry. The *LAEME* frequency counts are based on lexelex and grammel (aj) tokens.⁴⁶ The rightmost column shows the token count for the same subset of adjectives in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). The parentheses in the ME and the PDE columns indicate the set-internal ranking derived respectively from the *LAEME* data-base and from the *COCA* data-base. Items that have the same ranking in two out of the three periods are italicized.

⁴⁵ Stephen A. Barney, *Word Hoard. An Introduction to Old English Vocabulary*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴⁶ See http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/laeme2/laeme2_manual.html, for an explanation of these terms.

As expected, the frequency of individual words varies through time, and reflects the subject matter of the text, but such base-line statistics are still informative. It is reassuring to see that *good* is the top adjective in this subset, consistently ranking as the most frequent one for all three periods. For that item, the overlap between prosodic weakness and frequency of occurrence is perfect. The frequency ranking of *great* has climbed to second place in ME, which also tallies with our findings on its placement. The high frequency of *fair* in OE and ME matches the results; its stability is reflected in Graphs 7.2–7.5, which show *fair* appearing in weak metrical positions, unlike less frequent *dark*, *broad*, *black*, *wild*.

These are only first steps in a new area of research – I am not aware of attempts to quantify the behaviour of adjectives in ME verse that relate frequency in the ambient language to metrical placement and possibly text type. The claim is not that there is an absolute match between semantic content and frequency ranking – this is necessarily context-dependent – but that adjectives, other than the quantifiers, are hierarchized in the spoken language, and that their selection and placement in the text mirrors that hierarchy. For PDE the frequencies can be tested in different kinds of English – spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic writing – these are the *COCA* basic categories. Not surprisingly, more than 30 per cent of the attestations of *good* in PDE are from spoken records, and less than 10 per cent come from academic writing. The ratios are reversed for *broad*, for which the academic prose attestations exceed the spoken language data by 3:1. The increasing availability of digitized texts and tagged corpora opens up this line of inquiry into a broader spectrum of ME verse data.

A fine-grained comparison of item frequency and metrical placement is desirable in another way. In PDE 90 per cent of the word types are never spoken in isolation and the situation in medieval England cannot have been very different.⁴⁷ The statistics on the adjectives alone can and must be enriched with comparable statistics on the individual frequencies of the head nouns and the frequency of the adjective-noun collocations, controlling for formulaic stock phrases. Therefore a methodology allowing differential semantic weighting of the phrasal components, as in Putter and Jefferson or Putter, is the right direction for future inquiry. It is only after a much wider search and data analysis that we can address the question of whether the placement of adjectives and

⁴⁷ While it is not surprising that normal communication does not imply using single words, it is still striking that over 90 per cent of the word types are never spoken in isolation. Even in the nursery, ‘On average, 9.0% of the maternal utterances consist[ed] of isolated words’; see Michael R. Brent and Jeffrey Mark Siskind, ‘The Role of Exposure to Isolated Words in Early Vocabulary Development’, *Cognition* 81 (2001), B33–B44, at p. B36.

their head nouns can be one of the criteria for defining 'Romance' texts as 'popular' compositions, replicating patterns in the spoken language.

4. Attributive vs. predicative adjectival use

The spectrum of linguistic properties correlating textual form with textual function can be enriched further; this final short section outlines yet another potential direction for new research. In his sociolinguistic and discourse pragmatic study of adjective use in PDE, Robert Englebretson shows that formality level and social intimacy influence the grammatical choice of using an adjective attributively or predicatively: 'a greater number of attributive adjectives corresponds to increased formality level and social distance, while a greater number of predicative adjectives correlates with informal interaction among intimates'.⁴⁸ Englebretson argues that 'genre' (his word!) is a primary determinant in the selection of attributive vs. predicative use, i.e. predicative adjectives are more frequent when interlocutors are discussing referents that are shared knowledge among themselves, either based on social intimacy or situational context.

This stylistic dimension of grammatical adjectival choice has never been explored in the context of English medieval romance. Further, given the predicative/rhematic nature of post-posed adjectives (adj. + noun *and* adj., e.g. *A stalworth man and hardi bo* (*Sir Orfeo* 41); Malory's *a passing true man and a faithful*), and the unsettled state of word order,⁴⁹ the semantic properties of the adjectives are also of consequence. The stylistic characterization of adjectival placement can be extended to the use of intensifiers. Intensifying adverbs such as *full*, *very*, and *right* go through a process of semantic bleaching which develops parallel to their more frequent predicative use in Middle English.⁵⁰ In this connection it is of interest that the use of adjectival intensifiers in PDE has been identified as a signal of 'ingroup membership' in current sociolinguistic research. Rika Ito and Sali Tagliamonte's detailed study of the two most frequent intensifiers in PDE, *very* and *really*, shows that 'intensifiers

⁴⁸ Robert Englebretson, 'Genre and Grammar: Predicative and Attributive Adjectives in Spoken English', in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on Pragmatics and Grammatical Structure* (1997), pp. 411–21, at p. 418. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/lsa-publications/elanguage>.

⁴⁹ Olga Fischer, 'On the Position of Adjectives in Middle English', *ELL* 10 (2006), 253–88.

⁵⁰ Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1960), p. 330.

occur far more frequently with predicate adjectives than with attributive adjectives. Moreover, this is consistent for all age groups.⁵¹

Whether the findings and the stylistic inferences for PDE can be replicated in the older texts is an open question that can only be addressed by gathering more data. A tally of the placement choices of some adjectives in *The King of Tars* backs up the idea of associating predicative use with informality: the ratio of predicative to attributive use of *black* (x1/Ø), *white* (x4/x2), *proud* (x2/x1), *strong* (x4/x2), *wise* (x1/Ø) is in favour of predicative use. In *Sir Orfeo*, however, the ratios are less illuminating: *bright* is the only adjective in that text for which the preferred placement is predicative (x4) vs. attributive (x2).⁵² These are very preliminary figures, and further metrical, semantic and syntactic information is needed, but since the link between grammatical properties and style is beyond doubt, the search for clues along these lines can be productive.

5. Summary

Stories are the property of everyone, but a formal tradition is the property only of its practitioners, and it is *through its formal and stylistic aspects* – in combination with the others – that the history of romance can be most objectively analysed.⁵³

In the spirit of Pearsall's call for analytical objectivity, this essay is a pilot attempt to establish and start documenting formal properties of some verse romances in the hope that they will illuminate the oral and popular nature of these compositions. After considering the historical roots and presenting arguments in favour of the continuity of rising, right-hand phrasal prominence in English, specifically the Nuclear Stress Rule, Section 2 details the metrical positioning of monosyllabic adjectives in attributive noun phrases. The results are in line with a reconstruction of continuous presence of the rising prominence in the spoken language, but the metrical distribution did not show anything in the romances that would be outside the 'generic' norms in medieval verse. On the other hand, a better understanding of the salience and lexical ranking of the adjectives does show a more complex and fine-grained

⁵¹ Rika Ito and Sali Tagliamonte, 'Well Weird, Right Dodgy, Very Strange, Really Cool: Layering and Recycling in English Intensifiers', *Language in Society* 32 (2003), 257–79, at p. 272. I cannot address the extent to which the heaviness of the group *adverb + adjective + noun*, i.e. 'stacked modification' (see Huddleston and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, pp. 547–8), plays into that distribution, but since the default predicative use is (linking) verb followed by complement, it is to be expected that the weight of the complement will be significant.

⁵² In the entire *Sir Orfeo*, 123 adjectives are used attributively versus 53 used predicatively.

⁵³ Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance', p. 16.

interplay between a metrical template and the subtle ways in which poets and/or scribes respond to its constraints. The metrical use of adjectives is in accord with the oral and popular character of the metrical romances, but it is not unique to them. As for the ‘uniqueness’ of metrical romances in this respect, therefore, the question of whether conformity with the NSR is a good linguistic test for this type of text must be answered in the negative – it does not appear that adjectival placement is a reliable test of genre specificity.

However, the data collection was productive in a different direction. Putter makes a compelling case for reconsidering the correspondence between lexical categories and ictus in light of prototype theory. Drawing on the idea of categorial fuzziness, he shows that in alliterative verse metrical stress on adjectives and nouns can be sensitive to the ‘centrality’ or ‘peripherality’ of a lexical item. Items at the core of a lexical category behave predictably in the metre; such nouns and adjectives align with strong metrical positions, while non-prototypical items, for example quantifiers and common nouns such as *man*, can be non-ictic. Putter writes that it would be fruitful to see whether prototype effects apply more generally to categories not included in his data-base. His observations are confirmed by the examined set of adjectives.⁵⁴ As in other Middle English verse, in the romances ‘the beats will fall on the words that do most of the semantic work in the context’.⁵⁵

Building on the same idea, Section 3 turns to lexical frequency as another way of calibrating semantic weight. While the statistical match between prosodic weakness, low semantic weight, and frequency of occurrence is theoretically unsurprising, it is also a good base for evaluating the rather evasive properties of the romance genre. The correspondences plotted in Graphs 7.1–7.5 show discourse-based gradience. When the ambivalence of the evidence is evaluated against the variability of semantic weight, the continuity of the NSR gains in credibility. Taken singly, the tests in Sections 2 and 3 are not clearly determinate, but in the aggregate the examination of the romances has yielded a positive clue, both in terms of theory, and in terms of identifying features of the ambient language.

Finally, Section 4 is more programmatic than evidential: it turns briefly to the distribution of predicative vs. attributive adjectives. The idea that preponderance of attributive use in formal discourse presupposes social distance in PDE prompts an interesting direction of investigation, bearing in mind, of course, that ‘formality’ is a very different notion for us and for texts in a largely oral culture, commissioned by patrons, composed and copied by the literary elite, and intended for a very select audience. These factors have to be taken into consideration when analysing the transfer and preservation of the linguistic features of speech in the verse.

⁵⁴ Putter, ‘A Prototype Theory of Metrical Stress’.

⁵⁵ Jefferson and Putter, p. 212.

In his introduction to *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, Kevin Whetter defends the usefulness of the term *genre* for the identification of properties of the narrative poems known as romances.⁵⁶ The replicable formal tests isolated here add to the multiple ways of characterizing the distinctness of the much debated genre or species of insular romance. In an attempt to harness philology to provide clues to literary history, I have spotlighted some prosodic, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of adjective-noun phrases which are suggestive enough to render further investigation desirable and promising. To end on an optimistic note: I believe that the research model is applicable to a wide range of sources, allowing for comparisons between texts traditionally considered as belonging to the romance genre and other types of texts.

⁵⁶ Kevin Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), p. 5.