

The “writing” of spacing

Dividing alphabetical text into segments was an evolving technical element in writing. Apparently it was begun by Irish monks in an attempt to cope with Latin texts, then spread to vernacular texts in Insular writing. It seems to have first marked accent groups—the domain of composition that has to be construed for syntactic structure before it can be understood at all; word meanings can be looked for once the structure is recognized. Ultimately, in English writing of a familiar language native or not, division at word boundaries proved to be a good enough principle to govern the composition of most texts. The hyphen was adopted midway in this developement of writing English, with certain purpose at the end of a line of writing, but not always so anywhere else. The *Beowulf* manuscript text comes at the stage between dividing accent groups and dividing words; it does not use the hyphen.

How “tight” were the rules of graphotactics in the *Beowulf* manuscript? Somewhere near the tightness of the rules of spelling, though without as many means of making corrections in text after it was written. There were two letters *ð* and *þ* for one phoneme, and there were three distinctive shapes of the letter representing the sibilant consonant (*s* in modern form), both of these consonants having voiced and unvoiced allophones. There are the several instances in which the uncertain spelling of /ġ/, which usually is *cg*, was written first as *c*, and then *g* (i.e., insular *ȝ*) was inserted later, squeezed into a space far narrower than it would have had if it had been set down in the initial writing. There were allographic variants such as *geogope* and *iogope*. The name of the central figure of the poem is spelled *beowulf* and *biowulf*. The name of his uncle is *hygelac*, *higelac*, *hylac(es)*. Offa’s kinsman Hemming gets his name spelled “wrong” both times. A key candidate for “resolved stress” analysis of the meter of the poem is the first segment of *æpel-ing*, but what to make of *æpellingum* (906)? Similarly, “resolved stress” is invoked for *fræte-wum* (962) beside *frætwe-* fourteen times. There are *gid*, *gidd*, and *gyd*. Even such forms as *scapan* (479) have scribal emendation to *sceapan* to provide a diacritical *e* to mark the consonant cluster preceding it, as is common in spelling elsewhere. And so on.

To write a text by hand, with ink on parchment, is less demanding for the phonemic elements (set down in literal units) than for the prosodic elements. The “segmental” sequence can be generated, re-played (so to speak) for confirmation, and then encoded in segmental (alphabetical) writing. That is one letter at a time in the process of writing—a simple sequence to represent this sound, then this one, then this one. Prosodic elements are not sequential in this way, and consequently they require a different and less simple or tractable kind of generating, confirming, and committing to the textual composition. They are at least mid-size constructions, phrasal rather than verbal in their typical occurrences, and in any case not in mere lineal succession.

Finally, analysis which works from measures of data already in place—on the marble slab (so to speak)—tends to differ from analysis which regards the text as

speech represented graphically for its prosody and its segmental features both, in a process using alphabetical notation entered in a lineal sequence.

The text, after all, is the fixed product of a process of writing, as it encodes both the phonology in alphabetic symbols and the prosody chiefly in variations of the lineal spacing. Knowing how to “write” the prosody in this method is not possible by taking words as the domain of separate letter strings, or pairs of words, or any string not consistent with constructions identified by the syntax and meter. To know this depends on knowing the *performance* features (whether latent, as in silent reading, or uttered overtly). This kind of knowing reflects grasp of the verbal composition as a construction obeying the rules of syntax as well as the additional rules of meter.

Then, too, knowing and doing are separate. The transcribing of prosodic features by means of spacing variation allows few corrections or adjustments. Once the next letter string is begun, it will seldom be worth the effort to scrape off the new text in order to move the initial letter closer the end of the preceding string or farther from it. It can’t be monitored graph by graph—as spelling can in its representation of the succession of “segmental” phonemes—but only as representation of prosodic and metrical constructions, grouping the succession of morphemes.

This approach, I believe, should be welcomed by any metrist persuaded that a set of rules constitutes a theory of meter, and that the more elegant the roster of rules the more accurate the theory.