Jarai formulaic sayings: Hook rhyme & the nature of binarity in folk verse*

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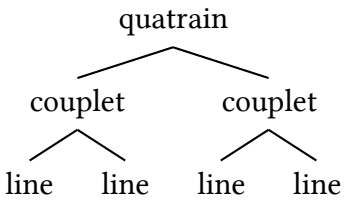
A common pattern that emerges in folk poetry around the world is the grouping of lines into couplets and of couplets into quatrains (Burling 1966, Hayes & Kaun 1996, Hayes & MacEachern 1998), as schematized in Hayes & MacEachern (1998):



Traditional Couplet & Quatrain Structure

In this paper, I examine how lines form larger constituents in folk verse in Jarai (Chamic, Austronesian; Vietnam). The particular verse form is the Jarai *formulaic saying*. I gathered much of the data from Jarai consultants in Dallas; other data is from Dournes (1976).

Jarai formulaic sayings are oral poems, typically embedded in narratives. These poems are characterized in part by their rhyme scheme. Example (1) nicely illustrates the form (rhyming syllables are bolded throughout; all poems are cited in complete form).

(1) 3-line poem (Đun Siu)[1]

a. amĭ ih kăn **pha**
mother 2s not allow

b. a**ma** ih kăn **brơi**
father 2s not permit

c. ayŏng a**dơi** ih kăn khăp
siblings 2s not love

Your mother won't allow
Your father won't permit
Your brothers and sisters don't care for me

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[1] All transcriptions use the Jarai orthography, which is reasonably transparent to the phonology and whose glyphs are close to their IPA look-alikes. Unfamiliar glyphs are as follows: OBSTRUANTS: ƀ = ʔb, đ = ʔd, V̆# = Vʔ; GLIDES: Vo = Vw, Vi = Vj; VOWELS: â = ɑ, o = ɑ, ô = o, ơ = ə, ư = ɨ.

I argue that lines in Jarai formulaic sayings are grouped in a strictly binary fashion to create couplets, and every line is parsed by at least one couplet. Furthermore, couplets overlap such that a line can be dominated by two couplets.

The most salient aspect of Jarai formulaic sayings is the rhyme structure: *Hook rhymes* join the last syllable of one line with a non-final syllable of the next line.[2] As (2) illustrates, each line is linked with the line before it through one hook-rhyme pairing, and with the line after it through a different hook-rhyme pairing.

(2) 4-line poem (H'he Siu)

a. drơi čĭm **phĭ**
CLF bird Phii'

b. **klĭ** čĭm **ã**
skin bird An

c. mơ**ta** trăng **glai**
eye grassy forest

d. **ɓuai** lŏm thet
lips while red

The (beautiful) Pi' bird
The skin of the An bird
The eye of the grass-like forrest
The lips while red

In the 125 rhyme pairs I have examined, the second member of the rhyme pair is usually at the left edge of the line (66%) or one word away from the left edge (18%). When the second rhyme fellow is non-initial, the initial position is often occupied by a repeated word or phrase, as in (3).

(3) 3-line poem (Lap Siu)

a. (ih kar hăng)
2S similar to

b. phŭn ajŭt ărăng **čram**
trunk small.bamboo they prune

c. phŭn **kram** ărăng **dje**
trunk large.bamboo they claim

d. phŭn a**le** ărăng koh
trunk small.bamboo they cut

(You are like)
The small bamboo already pruned
The large bamboo already claimed
The bamboo already cut

Jarai formulaic sayings can be as short as two lines, but there is apparently no maximal number of lines. The total number of lines can be even, as in example (2), or odd, as in example (4).

[2]The term *hook rhyme* is not original with me. Wilson (1990) uses the term to translate Willi Krogmann's *Hakenreim*.

(4) 7-line poem (H'he Siu)

a. čŭ pha-**ria**
mountain different

b. **ia** pha **nao**
water different go

c. **plao** pha **dŏ**
islet different stay

d. a**nŏ** pha **ngui**
residence different visit

e. a**pui** pha **diang**
fire different make.warm

f. **sang** pha **đĭ**
house different climb

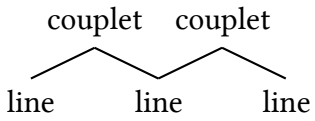
g. **anih** pha-ria klah
place different divide

Different mountains
Walking along different waters
Living on different islets
Visiting different residences
Different fires warming us
Ascending into different homes
Curtaining off different quarters

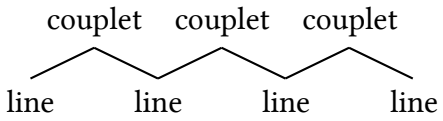
Out of the 63 formulaic sayings that I analyzed—a total of 195 lines—31 poems have an odd number of lines. Clearly, Jarai formulaic sayings with an odd-number of lines are by no means exceptional. But poems with an odd number of lines receive an inadequate parsing using traditional couplets, because at least one line must be left uncoupled.

Thus, Jarai formulaic sayings raise the question: What is the nature of line-grouping constituents in Jarai formulaic sayings?

My central claim is that all lines are parsed into couplets, but *overlapping constituency* is permitted, so each interior line is dominated by 2 couplets. This overlapping couplet constituency—which is signaled by the hook rhymes—can be visualized as in these figures:



Overlapping couplets for 3 lines



Overlapping couplets for 4 lines

My analysis gives several desirable results: (1) binarity is respected & minimal poem length is predicted; (2) every line is parsed into a couplet; (3) a formal domain (the couplet) is available to constrain the placement of rhymes; (4) every rhyme pair is given equal status; and (5) freedom of poem length (odd or even number of lines) is predicted.

This paper describes a novel poetic form, the formulaic saying, in an understudied language, Jarai, adding to the growing literature of formal approaches to meter in non-Western languages (among others, Prince 1989, Fitzgerald 1998, 2006, and Cole & Miyashita 2006). Additionally, I argue here that a binary grouping constraint joins lines into constituents, and that these constituents (the couplets) overlap. This analysis has implications for the representation of line constituency in the generative meter tradition, as well as offering a new parameter (overlapping line constituency) for the typology of verse forms.

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