

# PROSODIC FEATURES OF THE ITALIAN POETRY: A PHONETIC STUDY ON SOME READINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Prosody represents the heart of poetry and this is confirmed by the large amount of studies conducted in many related research fields. Nevertheless, if we consider the Italian references, the crucial role played by prosody in the poetry readings received very little attention. This paper aims to present the results of a comparative study based on the reading by different speakers (such as contemporary poets, radio speakers, modern and historical actors) of free verse poems (belonging to a collection of contemporary and modern Italian poetry readings currently underway). The acoustic analysis allowed to study the interaction between the prosodic features and the poetic text. Among the main outcomes, we observed a variable positioning of the prosodic boundaries depending both on the speakers' preferences and the layout constraints. A connection between different rhythm and intonation strategies employed by the speakers has also been identified.

**Keywords:** poetry, intonation, Italian, voices of Italian poets, prosody of poetry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The reading of poetry is one of the less studied aspects of Italian studies, as Fortini [8] and Beccaria [2] reported. As well as important and traditional Italian metric studies, we can also find quantitative stylistic methods from the Italian metric tradition. A significant amount of works, dedicated to the intonation of the poetic verse with a phonetic and experimental approach, has been developed for other languages thanks to Crystal [5], Fónagy [6] [7], Pamies Bertrán [17] [18]. We also mention the recent works of Mistrorigo [16], MacArthur *et al.* [14] and the German project Rhythmicalizer [19], inspired by Hartmann [9], that considered the free verse not metrically but prosodically. In the field of Metric Phonology, instead, we can mention Liberman & Prince [12], Hayes [11], Halle & Vergnaud [10], Nespor [13] and others whose contributions rely on more theoretical aspects. Experimental studies on Italian poetry reading are still very limited: an exception is the work of Schirru [21].

Considering a specific and general approach, based on a traditional distinction made by Cohen [4] between an *expressive* and an *inexpressive* way of reading (connected to the monotonous nature of the verse), Italian scholars such as Beccaria and Fortini expressed different views about this general bipartition of the reading style. In particular, the plane modern way of reading poems is considered closer to the rhythmic nature of poetry by Beccaria, whereas for Fortini this type would not be *inexpressive* but a particular kind of expression. Usually scholars speak about *execution*, whereas in this work we will prefer to use the word *interpretation*, looking at the relationship between text and voice as the link between composition and interpretation in music. Besides, we will not use the subjective *expressive* or *inexpressive* and we will not want to be normative, selecting a "right" way of reading.

In this paper we present an extract of a first experimental work [1], focused on the reading of the Italian poems through an instrumental phonetic approach. This research arises from Beccaria's studies on the rhythm of prose and will concentrate on a comparative analysis of some readings of the same poem.

This is part of a larger work, merged to an online vocal archive that includes Italian poetry readings by authors of the XX c. and contemporaries, together with professional speakers. The platform allows to have two main approaches: a comparative look, enabled by the numerous readings of the same text by different readers (other poets, actors, radio speakers, voice actors), and a specific analysis, focused on the single author and his way of reading.

Our hypothesis is that experimental analysis of acoustic variables may reveal different readings styles, especially considering the prosodic boundaries, the intonation choices and the emerging rhythmical patterns. Furthermore we aim at observing the behaviors of the speakers in front of the rhetorical *apparatus* of the poem with the constraints of an underlying free-verse structure. A particular attention to these levels of organization is promising, since an account of speech rhythm perception depending on pitch patterns has been proven by Romano [20], relying on Bertinetto [3].

## 2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Data

In this section we will present the data considered for this qualitative and quantitative analysis. The present work is grounded on a comparative approach, in order to better understand the dynamics of Italian poetic reading in a pilot study of data.

For this study we used a small *corpus* based on a representative poem of the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni, written in form of *prosopopoeia*, useful because of its characteristics that make it well connected to everyday speech. We checked the author's original readings and we considered his interpretation of the *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso*, preserved in and procured by *Discoteca di Stato ICBSA*. Later, we collected eleven other recordings of the same poem: we chose different voices at a professional and diachronic level (poetic, radio, acting speakers). In particular, the voices were those of six contemporary poets, three men (Claudio Damiani, Davide Rondoni, Gianfranco Lauretano), and three women (Paola Loreto, Stefania Negro, Ida Travi); two radio speakers and poets (Irene Santori, Laura De Luca) and three actors (two contemporary actors Alberto Rossatti, Roberto Herlitzka, and an old recording by Achille Millo). Eight of these recordings have been personally collected, whereas the remaining three belong to two CDs and one vinyl. All the audios were normalized and converted to the same *wav* format. We started from Giorgio Caproni's audio file, extending then the observation to the other voices.

### 2.2. Method

#### 2.2.1. Data segmentation and annotation

For this study we used PRAAT software to display acoustic variables and create different tiers of segmentation, annotation and labeling.

Listening to longer and shorter segments has been the starting point of the analysis, combined with the observation of pitch, intensity and spectrograms, even though only *f0* curves were considered for the comparisons. The sound data has been considered always related to the text and the analysis has been conducted by comparing different realizations of the same textual chunks.

We created four levels of annotation for each recording: a verse tier (corresponding to the verse, as written in the text), an utterance tier (corresponding to the prosodic curve), an intonation tier (for the curves as perceived) and a tone tier (for the tone units). We used an orthographic annotation and a label system [19] to describe the behavior of the

curves in specific cases. At the same time we opted for a prosodic subdivision on the text (using slashes for terminal and non-terminal boundaries).

#### 2.2.2. Terminology

The study required the creation of a specific terminology, necessary to distinguish this specific approach from the methodology used by metricists. For example, we used the expression *verso-curva* that means "curve-verse" when an intonation unit coincides with the written verse. Furthermore we called *parola ritmica* ("rhythmic word") the emerging element in the prosodic *continuum*, that is the place where the reader concentrates his/her attention and energy.

#### 2.2.3. Central focuses

After a detailed and global observation of the intonation curves and the boundaries segmentation, we calculated the number of *verso-curvas* in different readings, in relation to the text. This step was necessary to show the prevalent discordance between the oral production and the writing. Besides, we observed more in detail some aspects, like the rhetorical *apparatus* of the text and the most representative cases of convergence and divergence.

We examined in depth the ways of producing the enjambments in one *stanza* of the poem and the performing choices of some parts, relevant at a prosodic and rhetorical level, like two verses of the eighth *stanza*. In relation to this, we produced comparative graphs where vocal segments of the melodic portions were highlighted. These have been obtained through freely available scripts for Matlab.

Finally, we also identified a rhetorical system of prosody, that will not be discussed in this paper.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. General results

After a careful observation of the difference between prosodic and metric subdivision and the possible rhythmic and melodic interpretative modalities of reading, heterogeneous data fitted a more general system of convergences.

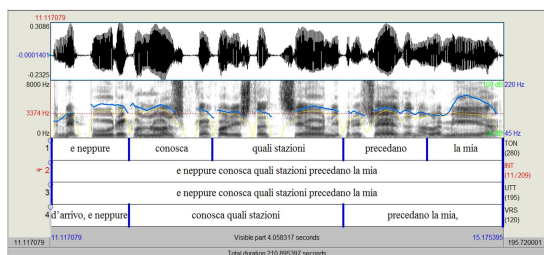
In this normative system two prevailing tendencies have been identified at a melodic level: a homogeneity of the frequency trend (plane), at least apparently (see Beccaria [2]), in some poets (Damiani, Loreto, Travi, Santori) and a variety of melodic movements in others (Caproni, Rondoni, Lauretano, Negro, De Luca, Rossatti, Herlitzka, Millo). Recurring melodic movements on a selection of *parola-ritmicas*, closely related to the identified intonation schemes, allowed us to consider the

existence of specific rhythmic and melodic patterns. They animate the free-verse composition both in homogeneous and in varying intonation.

Some prevailing tendencies of prosodic segmentation have been found: a metric way for poets and the elder actor, a syntactic subdivision for Caproni and female poets, a “syntactic-metric” approach for professional voices. We specify that we use the word “metric” relating to the way of reading that follows the verse as written on the text. In this way the intonation curves correspond to the verse and we find large numbers of *verso-curvas*. On the other side, the syntactic way is a reading style that follows the punctuation and the normal logic-syntactic structure of the text, overlooking the layout constraints. The syntactic-metric manner connects both the approaches, focusing on the more general scheme of punctuation, in relation to the metric structure. It appears constituted by different-length curves, that can include until six verses, produced by radio speakers.

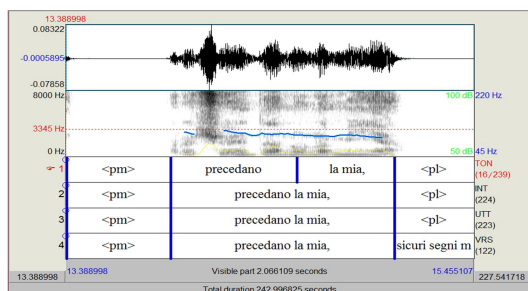
In depth we also observed the presence of recurring clichés. We take as an example the author’s reading mode, that is distinguished for his final rising tendency.

**Figure 1:** Praat window of Giorgio Caproni’s typical melodic solution



On the contrary we also found a fairly flat intonation mainly among the poets (male and female). This is particularly evident in a portion of an intonation curve in Claudio Damiani’s reading shown in Fig. 2.

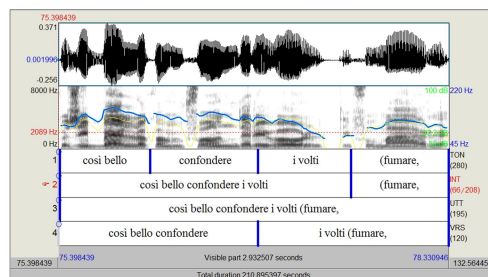
**Figure 2:** Praat window of Claudio Damiani’s plane melodic trend



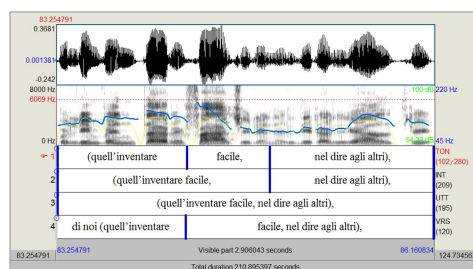
### 3.2. The enjambment

As we found out, also the textual rhetorical system, and particularly the enjambment, presented quite stable execution rules. Paying attention to the fourth *stanza* of the poem, the author doesn’t realize it by pausing in four occasions but he reads in a syntactic way. We report some graphic evidence in the following figures.

**Figure 3:** Praat window of Giorgio Caproni’s behavior in front of enjambment



**Figure 4:** Praat window of Giorgio Caproni’s behavior in front of enjambment



From a general comparison we also found that both metric and syntactic/syntactic-metric readings merged to the same choice and do not make use of enjambments through pauses (see Caproni, Damiani, Lauretano, Loreto, Negro, Travi, Rossatti, Herlitzka) or, as an alternative, reduced their production. In very few cases they chose to read the enjambment pausing, as indicated in the poem (e.g. Rondoni and Millo). However, a peculiar way of producing it has been found (particularly in Loreto and Millo): a local lengthening on the stressed and final syllables of the verse is achieved with higher *f0* values that raise a temporary sense of suspension without any silent pause.

Looking at the interpretation of the fourth *stanza* by the contemporary poets, we identified a prevalent organization that can be summarized in the evidence of phonic chains including a number of syllables from ten to twelve. Except for Rondoni, this choice is common to the author’s reading. Inside of these curves many variations emerge, e.g. in duration, melodic movements and stresses, causing different perceived pragmatic results and stress sequences.

Even though an inner variation could appear, a general norm is nevertheless evident.

### 3.3. Some comparisons

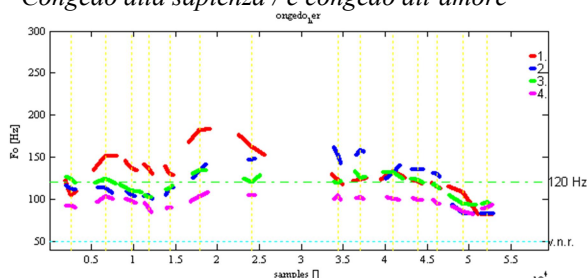
Considering two verses of the eighth stanza (vv. 83-84), *Congedo alla sapienza / e congedo all'amore*, we created comparative graphs. They appear peculiar for their construction and their prosodic realization: we discovered some general convergences and divergences in the organization and presentation of the units and the specific segments.

Starting from the boundaries segmentation, three main ways of subdivision have been identified: the prevalent partition in two independent *verso-curvas*; the three-component structure, composed by a broken-verse and a complete *verso-curva*; the four-curve pattern, based on the division of both verses in two units.

We chose to group similar segmentation choices in graphs that could highlight their common behavior and distinguish the particular differences in the single vocal segments. A description is shown below, concerning the first type.

A comparison between Caproni, Millo, Damiani and Herlitzka, that divide into two *verso-curvas* the intonation, appears as a significant example of convergence that has some divergences. As a matter of fact, if all these readings use the same way of splitting the verses, we can also note that the first curve of Caproni is detached from the others, looking upper, rising on the stressed syllable of *sapienza* and bending down on the last syllable. On the contrary, the author realizes the second curve in a middle range, whereas the other three readers differ. Besides, the actor Herlitzka uses a lower level of frequency twice.

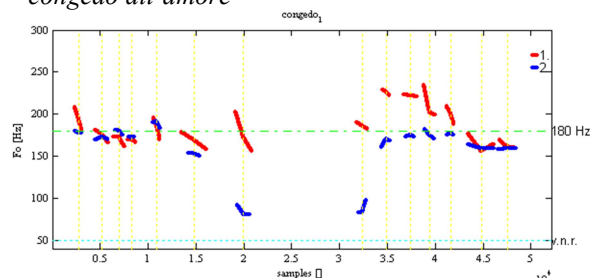
**Figure 5:** Graph of four pitch curves by Caproni (1), Millo (2), Damiani (3) e Herlitzka (4): *Congedo alla sapienza / e congedo all'amore*



As regards the realizations of two female voices, in spite of a common positioning of boundaries, quite different contours characterize these readings. After a similar beginning (*Congedo alla sapienza*), a different movement appears on the final

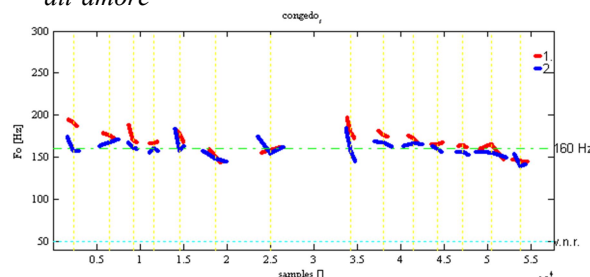
stressed and post-stressed syllable of the first intonation group. On the contrary, the second unit presents a very detached start and, consequently, the continuation of the melodic trend appears on a different pitch level.

**Figure 6:** Graph of two pitch curves by De Luca (1) and Loreto (2): *Congedo alla sapienza / e congedo all'amore*



Other graphs show a convergence in local movements and the global tone level, as shown by the comparison between Travi and Santori.

**Figure 7:** Graph of two pitch curves by Travi (1) and Santori (2): *Congedo alla sapienza / e congedo all'amore*



## 4. CONCLUSION

The study highlights many variables of phonetic performance of poetic composition. It reveals much of the inner structure and content of free-verse poem, together with a common hidden structure of the text that may connect different readings. A diachronic level separates the author's declamatory reading (paying more attention to the punctuation, in a strictly syntactical mood) from the contemporary poets' interpretations (more concentrated on the verse). The historical metric reading of the actor, who was also the dedicatory of the poem, is distinguished from those of contemporary voices. A general system has been identified, associated with a different positioning of prosodic boundaries and in the possible production of enjambment. This allowed us to identify general categories in poetry reading, together with a rich and specific variety, depending on professional constraints and personal choices.

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